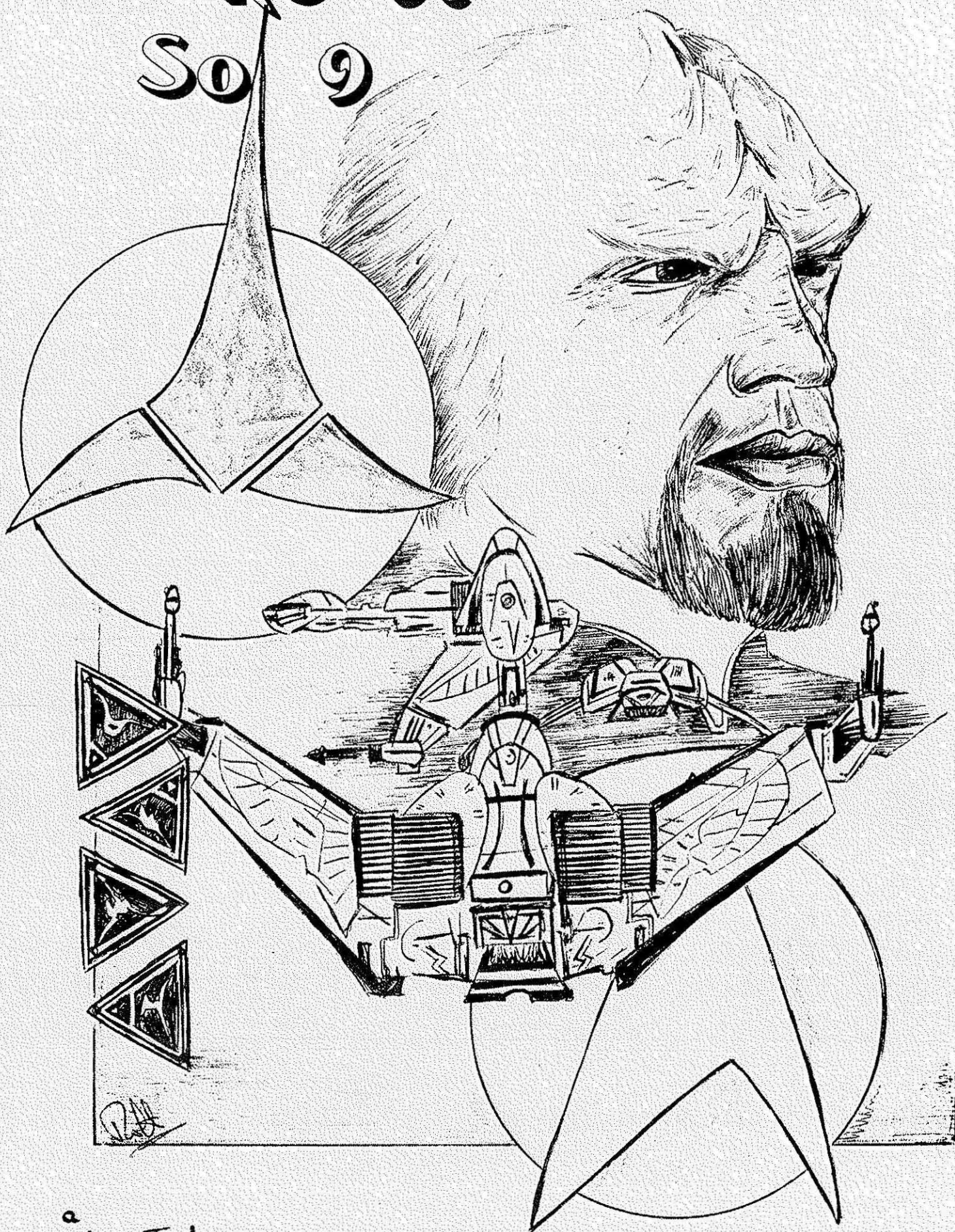


Make It So 9



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A ScoTpress publication

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Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton
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Distracting - Shona & Cindy

Make It So 9 is put out by ScoTpress and is available from -

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

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RETRIBUTION

by

Jacqueline Schmidt

Her eyes closed, a hand struck her face.

"Tell us where they are," a voice demanded of her.

"No," she replied defiantly,

"You will tell us eventually." The ropes chafed on her wrists. Everything was starting to spin.

"Take her back." She was hauled to her feet and dragged out of the room. She could hear screams coming from all directions. Soon silence would come for her too. Her body hit the floor as they threw her back into her cell. The floor was wet with blood - at least that was what she thought it was. There were no windows and no lights; the air smelt damp.

So far she'd managed to resist them, but for how much longer she didn't know. Time had stood still for her and the other prisoners. If asked she wouldn't have known what year it was. Why did it have to happen to her? She'd done nothing wrong. They'd snatched her from her home with the rest of her family. Where *they'd* been taken she didn't know. She hoped that they were either released or dead. The thought that they were going through this haunted her. She sank into a troubled sleep, her dreams filled with happier times but reality kept intruding.

"Sir. We are receiving a message from Starfleet Command." Worf looked at his Captain.

"On main viewscreen," Picard said.

"Sir."

Picard watched as the message was relayed. "Captain, you are to proceed immediately to Solzar 6 to assist in relief efforts. The present government is in its last days." Picard could have sworn that the Admiral was actually pleased by this fact. "No uniforms of any kind are to be worn." The Admiral knew that Picard would understand the reason for this.

Everyone within the Federation knew what went on under the present government on Solzar 6, but no-one had been able to do anything. The Klingons had threatened to act, but had been restrained by the treaty. Now that the government was collapsing they could act. But was it too late? Picard had no doubts that things would get better under a new government. They had to - people surely wouldn't let it happen again.

"Mr. Crusher, plot a course for Solzar 6."

"Course already laid in, sir."

"Engage," Picard ordered. He looked around the bridge. There would be a great deal of pressure on his crew during this assignment. He knew that they would do their duty but how they would cope with what they saw was another matter entirely.

The door to her cell burst open. "To your feet."

She tried to get up,

"Now." Two hands forced her to her feet. She was dragged out of her cell; she blinked as the light hit her eyes. Where were they taking her now? She stumbled. When she hit the floor they dragged her upright again,

"Move it." She noticed that there wasn't any screaming. Instead there were raised voices. *Panic*, she thought. They were afraid. That was ironic, after all they'd put her through; they had a weakness.

"In there." They'd stopped outside a large door. She could hear moans coming from inside the room. They pushed her into the room. She landed on something soft. Carefully she felt around. There were other people in the room with her. What were they going to do next?

Her heart beat faster, the voices outside of the room were becoming more and more frantic. There was something wrong, but what? The air inside the room started to get hot - it was running out. How much longer it lasted depended on how many people there were; *more importantly*, she thought, *how many are still alive*.

Picard sat in the center seat.

"How long until we reach Solzar 6?" he asked.

"Another seven hours, ten minutes and.., "

"Thank you, Data," Picard said cutting him off in mid sentence. Tension was starting to show in his crew's reactions. There was nothing more that they could do but wait.

Everything was starting to get blurred - *lack of oxygen. Sleep*. Her eyes closed. The door to the room opened with a resounding slam; she managed to force her eyes open again. The bodies around her were being dragged out. She made herself go limp.

"Burn everything," she heard a voice say, then she too was dragged out. The air from outside hit her lungs; she coughed.

"This one's still alive,"

"Doesn't matter." They continued to drag her out into the open.

She could smell the smoke. *No, please, not that!* she thought.

The smoke was thick but she could see them throwing bodies into it. The flames leapt higher with every body that was thrown on. As she was dragged closer to the fires panic set in.

Suddenly she was dropped; those who had been dragging her had fallen. She lay still, not daring to move. All the time her eyes were focused on the fire. She made out a face barely visible through the flames and smoke.

"Father! No!" Anger took hold of her. She struggled to her feet and ran towards the fire where she'd seen his face. When she reached it she plunged her arms into the flames desperately trying to save him. She ignored the pain.

"Help me, please!"

The flames continued to leap up; they caught her face. She fell back, then she saw him consumed by the flames.

"Come back! Please don't leave me alone."

The pain started to take over. She tried to get to her feet, but she didn't have the strength. She lay there filled with pain. Then there were voices, where from she couldn't tell. Why didn't they kill her and get it over with?

"Sir, now within transporter range of Solzar 6. Picking up a broadcast," Worf reported,

"On main viewscreen."

A blood-covered face appeared. "The President has been removed from office and is under arrest. We appeal for calm - there is nothing to fear,"

"Do we have the source of the broadcast?" Picard asked.

"Hailing planet now, sir," Worf said.

Picard stood up. "This is the U.S.S. Enterprise. We are here to assist in relief efforts,"

"I am Acting President Weiser. We are relaying transporter co-ordinates to you. The area that we wish your teams to go into is one of the worst we've found so far."

"Is it safe?" Picard asked, aware that he also had a duty to protect his crew from any possible danger.

"They've just rounded up the last of the enemy troops." The screen went blank.

"Bridge to sickbay."

"On route to transporter room now, sir," Crusher's voice replied.

The voices grew louder. They were getting closer now! Soon it would all be over; no more pain. That would be good.

"They tried to destroy the evidence."

"Do you think - ?" The voice stopped in mid sentence.

"No way are we going to find anyone."

The medical team from the Enterprise beamed down.

"You a doctor?" one of the voices asked. Crusher nodded,

"Nothing for you to do here. No-one left."

Anger inside her fought against the pain. She had to survive. There had to be someone left to tell what had happened! She rolled over and tried to move. The skin rubbed off her hands and arms - it sent a flash of pain through her. She opened her mouth and faintly said,

"Help me."

"Did you hear that?" Crusher asked,

"It was nothing."

Crusher scanned the area with a tricorder. "There's someone alive over there," she said, half in disbelief.

"Where?"

Crusher pointed to a spot behind one of the still burning fires.

"Stay here." The medical team waited until the soldier was ready to give them the all clear.

She looked around her. Footsteps! She tried to move towards them.

"Help me."

A face looked down at her. "Over here, quick!"

Crusher ran from where she was standing.

"She's alive, just. Crusher to Enterprise, medical emergency! Two to beam straight to sickbay."

Everything went black, then there were voices - different this time. She tried to open her eyes. Why couldn't she? What was wrong?

"Careful, she's got extensive burns,"

"Sickbay, this is the bridge,"

"Not now, Captain," Crusher replied.

"Doctor, we're losing her!"

"Goddam you, fight!"

She laid there trying to decide whether to fight or not. What would her father have wanted her to do? *Fight*. She'd survived this far. Silently she made a promise to herself that she would stay alive just long enough to see *him* dead.

"Heart beat and pulse now within normal ranges."

"Doctor," Picard said from within sickbay.

"Captain, I have work to do," Crusher said.

"Your patient?"

She looked at him. "She should be dead. Burns, malnutrition... and as for her mental state..."

"I've got to tell the new President to hand over the people who did this," Picard said regretfully.

"Why?" Crusher demanded to know.

"The Federation Council is going to try them,.." Picard could tell Crusher's reaction from the look on her face. "How do I tell them that we stood by and let this happen and now we're going to try their murderers?"

"Jean-Luc, this is going to cause trouble. The fewer people who know the better."

Picard left sickbay in silence. He had his duty to perform even though it went totally against his principles; justice had to be done - *but at what cost?* he thought to himself.

"Bridge to Captain." Riker's voice come over the intercom.

"Picard here."

"The President wishes to speak to you, sir. On the planet's surface."

Picard knew that Riker would attempt to stop him from beaming down. "Have Mr. Data join me in transporter room 3."

"He's on his way, sir." Riker still didn't like the thought of his Captain going into somewhere that was potentially a dangerous situation.

Picard headed for transporter room 3. Data arrived a few moments after him. He waited for a few moments before giving the order to be beamed down.

"Mr. President," Picard said.

"Please call me Jozef, Captain."

"What did you wish to speak to me about?" Picard already knew the answer.

"There are rumours being spread that the perpetrators of these atrocities will be tried elsewhere. Can you assure me that this won't happen?"

"They must be handed over into my custody. The Federation has prior claim," Picard said.

"Tell me why. It's our people who have been tortured and murdered," Weiser said angrily.

"I understand that you are upset."

"Upset? I'm a doctor, not a politician. Since we started to liberate the holding camps - that's what they called them - we've lost count of the bodies. What's going to happen to them?" he demanded.

"If found guilty - " Picard started to say.

"Guilty? Come with me." Picard could sense the rage that was building up inside Weiser. The best course of action was to follow him.

Eventually Weiser, Picard and Data entered a room that was dimly lit.

"What is this place?" asked Picard warily.

"Experimental Lab 4 - or as it's known locally, Frankenstein's Place. Lights."

Picard looked around the room.

"Are you all right, sir?" Data asked, suddenly aware that his Captain had turned very pale.

"What in hell?" Picard said shakenly. He turned to look at Weiser

"How?" asked Picard,

"Lights down. His doctors experimented," Weiser said.

"Can you help them?"

"How can we? We don't even know what was done to them. And you say 'if they are found guilty'?"

"More help is on its way. The Vulcans," Picard said. There was little that he could say. The images of what he had seen in that room would be with him for a long time.

"The Klingons as well." Weiser started to leave the room, but Picard remained standing, looking into the room,

"Captain, perhaps you would like to see the other work that we are doing here." He could see the reluctance in Picard's face. "I can assure you that it's not as bad as this."

Part of Picard wanted him to beam back up to the Enterprise,

but there was also a part of him that said he would have to see it all to understand.

"We have no shortage of visitors to this next section." In front of them were children. They rushed forward,

"Be careful! Amazing, after all they've been through they still laugh." Picard looked around the room. The children were laughing and playing. It was a sign that there was some hope after all. The mood of the children suddenly changed - they started to fight with each other.

"It's their way of coping. This is our future; maybe something can be saved," Weiser said.

"I would like to see more, but unfortunately - " Picard said, trying to make his excuses.

"You must leave. Before you go - the person on your ship?" asked Weiser.

"Our chief medical officer reports that she should recover from the physical injuries."

"Please thank your medical staff."

"Of course."

As Picard and Data beamed back to the Enterprise, the President's mind was already planning what he would do next. So far no-one had realised who he was. The fewer witnesses that were left the better. When everything had died down, then he could finish his work; but he knew that all his plans rested on no-one being able to recognise him.

Her arms itched. That was the first thing that she felt. The itching was then replaced by a dull aching. She tried to open her eyes. All there was in front of her was blackness, then bright light. She closed her eyes again quickly. Flames - then his face.

"Father!" Then she realised that there was someone else there.

"Dr. Crusher!"

Crusher came over to where she lay. "You're safe."

"Father, the flames. The flames!"

"Just lie still," Crusher said reassuringly.

"I won't tell you!" she said.

"Quiet. I'm not going to hurt you. Open your eyes slowly." She tried to. "If they hurt, tell me. What can you see?"

She hesitated for a moment. The voice sounded vaguely familiar. Well, the only thing left that they could do was kill her.

"Hurt, blurred."

"Close them. I can give you something for the pain."

"No. Father!"

"I'll get you something to eat."

She tried to work out whether she was really safe or not. They could be lying to her, trying to get her to tell them what she knew - which was nothing.

"Try this soup - slowly." It smelt and tasted good. After so long, real food. She had to be safe - they wouldn't waste good food on her if they were going to kill her later.

"Good. Want to sleep." She sank into a deep but troubled sleep.

Picard strode into sickbay. "How is she?" he asked.

"Asleep again. What happened?" Picard tried to explain what he had seen, but somehow words didn't seem enough.

"How could they do that?" Crusher asked.

"Do we know who she is yet?" asked Picard trying to change the subject.

"Not yet. I'll get Troi to see her when she wakes up."

"Inform me when she does. I want to talk to her."

"I will," Crusher replied.

Picard left sickbay and returned to the bridge.

She kept dreaming the same thing over and over again. Faces burning, then her father begging her to help him; voices screaming, then blackness and silence. It was the silence over everything that frightened her the most. The other things, she couldn't have done anything about, she told herself - or at least she tried to. The silence... nothing would make it go away. It was always there.

When she woke up it took her some time to remember where she was. Then it came back to her; she was safe. By now, she thought, they had had plenty of time to get rid of her. They could have poisoned the soup but they hadn't. Still she had to be on her guard, she would tell them nothing - that was the only thing that she could do.

Crusher noticed that she was awake again.

"Eyes don't hurt, not blurred," she said.

"Good."

She tried to get off the diagnostic table. "Stay where you are, you're still very weak."

She changed her mind; it would be better to obey, if only for a little while, then she could get up. But what could she do?. There was nowhere that she could go, no-one that she could ask to see. At least, there wasn't anyone that she knew was still alive.

Crusher, reassured that she would stay there, went into her office.

"Crusher to bridge. She's awake, Captain."

"On my way, Doctor. Picard out." He then turned to face Riker. "Number One, have Counselor Troi meet me in sickbay."

"Aye, sir."

Picard left the bridge. "Sickbay," he said in the turbolift. There were so many questions that he wanted - no, had to ask her. He got out of the turbolift. Troi was already in sickbay when he arrived.

"She's very confused, sir," Troi said. "It's only to be expected."

Picard walked over to where she lay.

"Father."

"She keeps saying that," Crusher explained.

"You're on the U.S.S. Enterprise. I'm Captain Jean-Luc Picard. Do you understand?" She gave a faint nod. "No-one is going to hurt you, I promise. Can you tell me your name?" Picard asked.

"Don't know."

"Can't you remember?"

"No."

Troi looked at Picard, "She's blocked it out, sir."

"Jean-Luc, the Human mind does this in cases of extreme shock. From which she is still suffering," Crusher said.

"Doctor, there has to be something she remembers."

"Would you? After what she's been through I'm surprised she's still reasonably sane."

"Captain," Troi said. "You will have to take things very slowly. She's getting more confused."

"Counselor, I am aware of that fact," Picard said.

"My face!" She could remember that the flames had touched her face.

"It's healing," Crusher tried to explain.

"See."

"Not yet. Soon."

"What do we call you?" asked Troi. "Do you know any names?"

"No, Father," she said.

"Captain, she's getting very confused now," Troi said.

"Rest," Picard said,

"No, silence comes." She looked at him. He didn't seem to want to hurt her. Part of what had happened kept coming back to her.

"Father, don't go away."

"I'll come back to see you later," Picard said.

"Promise." She waited for him to answer her.

"I promise," Picard said. She smiled at him. Picard started to leave.

"I love you, Father."

Both Crusher and Troi smiled at hearing this, Picard just left sickbay with greater haste. They still had to tell her that her father was dead.

She watched them. They were taking no notice of her. She needed to see what was outside of this room. It might be safe in here but not out there. They could be hiding something from her, she thought. What they weren't telling her was as important as what they were. At least her father was here... Something was wrong, he shouldn't be! Where had he gone? Didn't he know that she needed him? They'd done something to him, changed him. They could do that, she'd seen it happen before. She decided that she would have to find him and help him to escape.

Carefully she climbed down off the table. It shouldn't be too hard to find him. He had a different name here - she could remember what he had called himself and the place that he'd come from. *Good*, she thought, they weren't able to see her leave. The doors to sickbay opened; she took a step back. *A trap!* Then she realised that it hadn't hurt *him*. Cautiously she walked through them. There wasn't anyone around. She looked for a way to get to him. Another set of doors opened, and she stepped inside,

"Bridge," she said. It started to move; there was nothing that she could do now. She pressed herself up against one of the walls. It stopped; she waited for something to happen. When nothing did she opened her eyes and still waited. *Waiting for what?* she thought. Someone would find her. It was then that she decided to move. She tried to make herself relax, but there was no way that she could drop her guard. Maybe she should go back to where it was safe?

She took a few steps forward, her heart beating faster. There was someone watching her, she could tell that. A few more steps - that was all it would take to reach her father. If her father wasn't here they might know where he was. She took the last few steps out of the turbolift.

"Do not move," a deep voice boomed. She froze. It was a trap after all! They were going to kill her.

"No hurt, Father," she shouted. She looked around. Where was he? Then she spotted him. They had him surrounded!

Picard turned to face her, "You shouldn't be here," he said.
Now all she could see were flames and his face.

"Come here."

"I'm... I can't," she replied,

"Why not?" asked Picard.

"The flames." Why couldn't he see them?

"There aren't any flames here," he said trying to reassure her.

"You were in them, burning, screaming." It was then that the full realisation of what she must have seen struck Picard. He knew that he had to handle this situation very carefully.

"Tell me your name."

"Kara," she said.

"Do you trust me?" Picard asked. She gave a faint nod.

"Walk towards me slowly."

"Can't. Flames. Afraid," she said.

"Lt. Worf is going to help you."

"I try for you, Father." She tried to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. Slowly she took one step, then another. They were watching her; she had to do it.

Worf watched her and carefully followed her, trying not to make any noise.

"A few more steps," Picard said, encouraging her.

"Going to do it." As she got closer and closer to him the flames got higher and higher. *There's nothing there*, she tried to tell herself.

"Flames too bad," she said.

"There are no flames."

She tried concentrating to block out the flames. They started to die down - now she could get to him. As she took the last few steps a noise disturbed her.

"Father!" She spun round and saw Worf. "No tell where!"

"Kara, no-one is going to hurt you," Picard said.

"Why follow me?" What was he planning to do to her?

"Duty," Worf said. She looked at him.

"Klingon?" she asked. She looked at Picard. He nodded.

"Trust. Take last steps with me." Worf looked at her then at Picard.

"Please," she implored him.

There was something in her tone of voice and the look in her eyes that caused him to react. She had courage; that impressed him. Not many people would have survived what she had been through, never mind try to overcome it so quickly.

"Lieutenant."

"Sir?" Worf replied. She held out her hand for him to take. He hesitated, then took it, trying not to notice the looks that the rest of the bridge crew were giving him. Slowly she took two more steps, then she realised that he was in front of her. She took another two steps. Now she was level with him.

There was no need to be afraid anymore, after all if the flames weren't hurting him they couldn't hurt her either.

"Last steps now." She took a deep breath. *A few more seconds and it will all be over*, she told herself. Panic started to set in. What would they do to her? She didn't have any skills.

She saw the faint smile on his face as she reached out to touch him with her free hand.

"I did it," she said. She turned to Worf and smiled. His face remained stoic.

"Hug," she said expectantly. He looked around the bridge. What did they expect him to do? She let go of his hand and wrapped her arms around him.

"Don't you want to hug?" she asked him.

"No," he replied. Tears started to run down her cheeks. She let go of him.

"Do I have to go back?" she asked tearfully.

"Where to?" Picard asked her.

"My cell. Only if they catch me they'll kill me and I don't want that to happen."

"You don't ever have to go back to your cell," Picard said, trying to reassure her.

"Never?" She looked at him. Was he lying to her? People had lied to her so much before that she didn't know if he was lying or not - still, he was her father and she knew that she should trust him, if only for that fact.

"No-one is going to make you do anything that you don't want to." He realised that it might take some time for her to decide whether to trust him or not. It was only natural that she would have a great deal of mistrust about someone wearing a uniform. Experience would have taught that people who wore uniforms tended to lie and hurt.

She looked around the bridge. As far as she could see no-one was hurt. *Maybe, she thought to herself, he's telling the truth. After all, the worst that can happen is that he'll kill me later on when he has what information he needs.*

"I believe you. Only because of the Klingon. Klingons are honourable - no hurt children," she said hesitantly to Picard. If he did try to kill her then the Klingon would stop him - at least that was what she hoped would happen. When the bad things had first started it had been the Klingons who had tried to stop it. People hadn't believed them until it was too late to do anything but pray that it wouldn't happen to you. She had seen what they had done to the Klingons who had stayed behind.

"You have to go back to sickbay. Lt. Worf, escort our guest to sickbay," Picard said. At least she trusted Worf, which was a start; not much of one, but a start all the same. It was, he thought, remarkable that she could trust anyone so soon after what she had been through. Whether that trust would remain long enough for him to ask all the questions that he had to was another matter entirely.

Kara looked at Worf. *At least there's someone to protect me now*, she thought. If things started to go bad then he would help her. She followed him into the turbolift and the doors closed.

"You are a good person," she said to him. He said nothing in reply. "Klingons tried to stop the bad things. I believed. Others didn't until too late."

Worf looked down at her then said, "Stay in sickbay. Do not leave it again without permission from the Doctor." It was for her own good.

"I promise. Why is father so different here? What did they do to him?" she asked.

"The Doctor will explain about your father. No more questions." There was something about her that stirred him. She was so small and helpless, yet she had managed to survive when others had not.

The turbolift doors opened and he walked her into sickbay,

"You come and see me again," Kara said to Worf. He turned and left.

"And what do you think you were doing?" Crusher asked her.

"Looking for my father. I found him," Kara said. She was starting to feel so tired.

"Back into bed. Don't go wandering off again. You're still very ill." Crusher helped her back into bed.

Kara tried to keep her eyes open. If she closed them the silence would come back. Eventually she couldn't keep them open any more. She could see the flames; they were burning everything in sight. Her father! She had to get to her father! The flames were too strong for her to get through. She started to scream, and woke up still screaming.

"Fire! Help me, please... "

Weiser had his plans all ready. There were very few people left who could identify him. Once the hunt for the torturers was

over he could start his work again, quietly at first then, when people had started to forget the past, he could really put his plans into action. He would not let the same thing happen again. The best part of his plan was that he would be called to testify against his old colleagues, and who would believe them that he had masterminded the whole thing? If he was especially convincing he might even get an award for his part in the research to help the poor victims. He was determined that nothing would stop him. Anyone who happened to get in his way would just simply disappear or have a very unfortunate accident just before they were going to testify.

Crusher rushed over to the bed where Kara lay.

"It's all right. You're safe," she said soothingly.

"The flames! I saw my father. Couldn't help him," she said, tears running down her face. "But he's still alive, isn't he?" she asked Crusher.

"We'll talk about that later, when you are stronger. I want you to get some rest now."

"No. Sleep, silence comes," she said.

"All right, I can give you something to stop the dreams if you want."

"No, nothing. I just lie and think," she said. They weren't going to give her anything to help her sleep if she could help it. Other people had taken things, and then they were gone or *different*.

Picard was on the bridge. He felt restless. There was nothing more that he could do until the prisoners were beamed on board. Something was not quite right; what, he couldn't put his finger on, but he could sense it.

"Sir, we're receiving a message from Acting President Weiser," Worf reported.

"On visual," Picard ordered,

"Captain. I have something important to inform you about. Several of the prisoners are dead," Weiser said calmly.

"What? How did this happen?" Picard demanded.

"It appears that they took their own lives. It was partially expected so we took precautions, but they obviously weren't sufficient. I am sorry, Captain. However, the remaining prisoners will be beamed up on your orders." Weiser was finding it extremely easy to lie, he'd done it so often before. "I will also be beaming up, to attend the trials of these criminals." He tried not to look as if he was gloating.

"Thank you for the information. I will arrange for quarters to be arranged for you," Picard said.

The viewscreen went blank. As soon as it had, Weiser started

to laugh. This was his greatest stroke yet! He had carefully selected those that he still needed and made sure that they were taken for questioning. The best part of it was the fact that one of them was going with him on board the Enterprise to finish off what had been interrupted. By the time that the first part of his plan was finished there would be no witnesses left at all. Already most of the survivors had taken their own lives - or so it seemed to anyone who asked too many questions. By the time that anyone realised what exactly was going on it would be too late. So what if they found something linking him to the horrors? There wasn't any actual proof, so what could they do to him? After all, justice meant that he was innocent until proved guilty. He smiled to himself.

Kara lay there. She didn't feel sleepy any more. She waited for something to happen; what, exactly, she didn't know, but something was bound to. She looked around her surroundings. At least it was light, clean and warm compared to her cell. No-one had hurt her yet and she wasn't going to give them the chance to if she could help it at all. She watched as Crusher wandered around sickbay. What would they want in return for helping her? She had no money or skills that they might need.

Her eyes kept straying towards the door of sickbay. Maybe her father would come and visit her, or the Klingon - he hadn't said that he wouldn't. She tried not to think about how many of the people she knew might still be alive, for the chances of any of her friends still being alive weren't very good. She had only just managed to survive. Quietly she started to hum to herself - anything was better than the silence that kept haunting her. The humming grew louder.

Crusher looked at her; so that was where the noise was coming from.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked.

"I don't like the silence. I will stop it if you want."

The Doctor shook her head. "Is it a song that you know?" Crusher realised that anything might help to gain her trust.

"It's something I used to sing before. My father liked it." Kara stopped as she realised what she had said - *liked* instead of *likes*. That meant that he was dead after all.

"You said liked," Crusher said.

"He's dead, isn't he? That man on the bridge isn't my father, is he?" Kara said.

Crusher walked over to where Kara sat. "How do you know that he's dead? He might have survived," the Doctor said gently.

"I saw him. The flames. I couldn't get to him." Kara burst into tears.

"It's all right." Crusher placed her arms around Kara's shoulders.

Just then the doors to sickbay opened, and Worf walked in. He

took one look at the scene and started to walk out again.

Crusher saw him. "Lieutenant, what are you doing here?" she asked.

"Just... " He didn't know what to say.

"Would you mind keeping an eye on my patient while I talk to the Captain?" Crusher took her arms from around Kara's shoulders. Worf walked slowly to where Kara was sitting.

"I haven't left here. I promised," Kara said. What was he going to do to her?

"I know. If you had I would have been notified, unlike before." He made the fact that he didn't like the Doctor's lax behaviour.

"What is happening there?" she asked, referring to her home.

"Why do you want to know?" Worf asked defensively.

"It is my home. I have a right to know. Tell me, please. I'll give you anything. Just tell me!" Tears continued to run down her face. Worf looked at her, not knowing the right way to react.

"The Captain will need to ask you some questions soon." It was not his place to tell her what was going on.

"What kind of questions?" she asked cautiously.

"About what happened to you. It may be unpleasant for you," he said, trying not to look at her.

"Do I have to answer them?" She wanted to know what they would do to her if she didn't do as they said.

"Yes, if you want justice," he said.

"If I don't answer them, will I be punished?"

"No." What was taking the Doctor so long?

Crusher stood in her office to avoid Kara's overhearing her.

"She's started to remember some things, such as the fact that her father is dead. Jean-Luc, she saw him being burned. Whether he was alive or not I don't know. That's apparently how she got those burns - she tried to save him," Crusher explained.

"Doctor, shortly we will be taking those who are left of the people who did this on board," Picard said.

"What do you mean by *those who are left*?" Crusher asked.

"The Acting President has informed me that some of the prisoners have committed suicide," Picard said. "The Acting President will also be beaming on board to attend the trials. I need to talk to your patient as soon as possible. There aren't many witnesses left either." Things just weren't right. He would get to the bottom of it and the sooner he did the better.

"She's still very weak and in shock, but if you keep the questions to the minimum then I will allow you to see her. Just don't put too much pressure on her," Crusher said. If things were getting too hard for her patient she was well within her rights to stop any questioning.

She cut the link with the bridge and walked out of her office.

Worf was still standing by the bed where Kara was sitting when he saw the Doctor come out of her office.

"The Captain wants you to answer some questions," she said, waiting to see how Kara would react.

"I know. He told me," she said.

"Who, the Captain?" Crusher asked.

"No, him." She pointed to Worf.

"You mean Lt. Worf. Do you want to answer the Captain's questions?" Crusher asked.

"Yes, if *he* can stay." Kara held her hand out to Worf. She looked at him. Didn't he know that she needed him to protect her?

"That depends on the Captain," Crusher tried to explain.

"No Worf, no answers," Kara said. She looked at Crusher, waiting for her to get angry with her.

"Seems as if the Captain has very little choice in the matter." Jean-Luc would not like it one bit but if wanted his questions answered he would have to go along with it.

Picard left the bridge after giving orders for both the prisoners and the Acting President to be beamed up. The prisoners were to be held in a maximum security cell - he was taking no chance with either their escaping or of their taking their own lives. As for the Acting President, there was something strange about him wanting to attend the trials; surely he should have been too busy organising things? Perhaps, being a Doctor, he wanted to make sure that the prisoners didn't get away with it. Picard knew that despite everything that they had done they would have a fair trial and if they were found innocent all hell would break loose. He walked into sickbay; there were so many questions that he needed to - no, *had* to ask Kara. The more that they knew about what happened the more evidence that there would be.

He was surprised to see Worf in sickbay. "Lieutenant, why aren't you in transporter room 4?" Picard asked.

"He is here at the request of my patient," Crusher said.

"I see," Picard said. He looked at Kara. "You have been told that I have to ask you some questions. Just take your time, there is no hurry," he said trying to reassure her.

"I am ready," Kara said. She tried to take hold of Worf's

hand, but he moved it away from her. "My name is Kara Alton. My friends - " She stopped in mid-sentence. She didn't have any friends any more. " - used to call me Green because I could grow anything. I like flowers and plants. We lived on a farm. My father - " Tears ran down her face. "I thought that you were him. I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"If you want me to stop asking questions just tell me," Picard said softly.

"I'll be all right. My father wanted me to be a doctor," she said.

"You still can be," Crusher said.

"No, doctors hurt people. They do bad things to them," Kara said angrily.

"What do the doctors do to people?" Picard asked.

"Hurt them. They get the purples to help them."

"What are the purples?" asked Picard.

"They come and take you away. You can't stop them. If you try they kill you," Kara stammered.

"Where do they take you?" Picard was surprised by how easy it was to get her to tell him what he needed to know.

"Depends. Some to Frankenstein's or to the holding camps. No-one ever leaves Frankenstein's. I was lucky, I went to holding camp." She *had* been lucky, she knew that.

"Why were you being held in these camps?" Picard looked at her. She was looking very pale now.

Kara looked searchingly at Worf. Why didn't he help her? She was so afraid now. She stretched out her arm until she could just touch his hand. It made her feel better.

"There's no need to be afraid. All I want to know is the truth," Picard said, trying to explain the reason for his questions. "The camps. Tell me about them. Would I be sent there?" Kara shook her head. "Who would be sent there? Just tell me that," he tried to coax her.

"People like me," she said.

"Why people like you?" Picard waited anxiously for her answer.

"Because..." Kara tried to think of a way to tell him. "Because..." She was finding it so hard to concentrate...

"Captain, stop this questioning now. She's in no state to tell you anything," Crusher said. He'd overstepped his authority this time.

"Doctor, we need to know why people were sent to these camps," Picard said. He didn't like asking these questions, but he had to.

"I'm not Human," Kara said. That was why they had done the bad things to her.

"What do you mean by 'not Human'?" Crusher asked. There was nothing out of the ordinary about her.

"They said that we were not fit to share the same world as them. We wanted to leave but they wouldn't let us. They did things quietly at first, but then got power. Then all the bad things started to happen. You didn't help us. Why?" Her emotions were a mixture of fear, anger and despair. Kara tightened her grip on Worf's hand.

"We have laws to stop us from interfering," Picard said.

"You helped them torture us! You're as guilty as they are! You let it go on!" she screamed at Picard.

"I think you've done enough damage for now, Captain," Crusher said angrily.

"Some people tried to stop it. You encouraged them, then when they needed your help you turned your back on them." Kara tried to get up,

"I'm going to kill them, and you're going to watch me do it," she screamed after Picard as he left the sickbay. She kept trying to get up. Why couldn't she? She then saw that Worf had moved and that he was holding her down.

"Let me go. I helped one of you to escape - that's why I was in the camp," she cried. Surely he would help her to get them. She had never regretted helping the Klingon to escape, though she had known what would happen if she was caught. Someone had told on her, not that she blamed them. If it came to a choice you looked after your own family first. She heard a faint hiss; things were starting to get hazy. They were killing her.

"No!" she screamed.

Worf, once he was sure that she was out, left sickbay and headed for transporter room 4. It was his duty to guard the prisoners, and it was not a duty that he was looking forward to.

After leaving sickbay, Picard had headed for transporter room 4. He wanted to see the kind of men who could do such terrible things. He was standing there when Worf entered,

"Lieutenant," Picard said.

"Dr. Crusher has sedated Kara. She was in the camp because she helped a Klingon to escape," Worf said.

"I see. Beam the prisoners up," he ordered.

"Aye, sir," Chief O'Brien replied as he checked the co-ordinates that he had received.

Four men under armed guard materialised in front of them. When one of them saw Worf he spat on the floor and said, "Alien scum."

Picard took a deep breath. This was definitely going to be much harder than even he had at first realised. He watched as Worf and the security team that was present led the four men out of transporter room 4. As there was nothing to detain him there any longer he returned to the bridge. When he arrived, Commander Riker moved out of the center seat.

"Dr. Weiser has already beamed on board, sir," Riker explained.

"Good. Mr. Data, plot course for Starbase 73," Picard ordered.

"Course plotted and laid in, sir," Data replied.

"Engage," Picard said. He kept thinking about what Kara had said. It was true that the Federation had stood by and let it happen; it was also a well known fact that they had supported several attempts to help with the removal of the government but always they had stopped short of sending any actual help, on the grounds that it would break the Prime Directive. It was times like these that he thought that the Prime Directive did more harm than good.

Worf escorted the prisoners to their cells. He kept hearing mutterings about *alien, should have been killed at birth* from the prisoners, but he kept control of his temper. It would be interesting to see what would happen if one of them managed to escape. Would they try to beg for mercy as their victims had? While thinking this, he found that Kara kept intruding in his thoughts. Although she was a remarkably strong-willed person and that he admired, he couldn't understand why she kept trying to touch him.

Crusher watched as Kara slept. How much damage had been done she didn't know. What she had said was true; for some reason Crusher felt guilty. Doctors had a duty to stop suffering wherever possible, but in this case they had actually been the cause of it.

Weiser walked up and down in his room. It was all working out according to plan. No-one suspected anything was wrong. Later, he decided, he would go to see his old friends. He would of course deny everything they said. Who would believe such madmen's rantings as the truth? The witness was another matter entirely - he would have to be very careful not to get caught. Still, he could get his assistant to do *that* little job for him. He had much more power than before, everyone was so grateful to him for saving them; they would do exactly as he wanted them to do.

Kara tossed and turned. She still saw the flames, only this time someone was with her before she got to them. Why couldn't she see his - her? - face? A hand... she could see a hand, and it was hitting; a voice - she could hear a voice. Then there was that awful smell of burning flesh, then the silence came. Over and over she kept seeing the flames and the hand, but every time she tried to see who it was the face was blank.

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Picard decided that it was time to see the Acting President, if only to welcome him on board officially.

"Number One, you have the bridge. I'm going to welcome our guest. Lt. Worf, come with me," Picard said. Both Riker and Worf looked at him. What was going on? Worf followed his captain off the bridge,

"Lieutenant, you said that Kara was in the camp because she helped a Klingon to escape," Picard said.

"Yes, sir. The prisoners made several remarks about my being non-Human," Worf said.

"I hope that you are taking all necessary precautions with our guests," Picard said.

"Yes, sir," Worf replied. He waited for his Captain to explain further. When he didn't, Worf decided to leave things as they were.

Picard wondered what sort of man Weiser was. He hadn't seemed at all shocked by what he had seen. He could be coping with it very well; if not he would be showing sign of stress.

The turbolift stopped and Picard and Worf got out. They walked down the corridor towards Weiser's quarters. Worf walked a few paces behind Picard. They reached the door to Weiser's quarters; Picard was sure that he heard something from inside the room, music. Just then the door opened and a man came out. Picard could see Weiser inside the room. He was sitting at a desk.

"Can I help you at all?" said the man who had just come out of the room.

"I'm looking for Dr. Weiser," Picard said.

"If you will wait for a moment I will ask if you can see him." The man returned inside Weiser's room. The door closed.

"There's someone to see you, looks like the Captain's paying you a visit. There's one of *them* with him," the man said.

"Show them in, Collin," Weiser said, smiling.

Picard and Worf stood there waiting for the door to reopen. Picard did not like having doors shut in his face. The door re-opened and they were shown in to see Weiser.

"Ah, Captain. Please forgive my assistant, he's still learning the job, as am I," Weiser said.

"This is Lt. Worf, Head of Security." Picard watched as Weiser got up and attempted to shake Worf's hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant. Some of the best fighters for our cause were Klingons. Unfortunately they are no longer with us," Weiser said. He wondered how long they were going to stay - the thought of being in the same room as a non-Human for more than a few seconds sent a shudder of revulsion through him.

"I wasn't aware that you had taken part in the fighting," Picard said to Weiser.

"Alas, only a very small part. I was kept busy dealing with the poor victims of those - " He stopped to make it look as if he was about to lose his temper. "At least now justice will be done. How is the patient in your sickbay?" Weiser tried to sound concerned.

"Recovering slowly," Picard said. He wasn't going to give anything away.

"Perhaps I could see the poor thing later, just to lend my support." Weiser knew that he had to get to the patient, before whoever it was said anything.

"I'm sure that my Chief Medical Officer will allow it," Picard said. "As for the prisoners, they are being watched extremely carefully."

"That is reassuring to know," Weiser said. There went his chance for any more suicides. Still, that couldn't be helped. If he aroused too much suspicion the whole thing would turn out to be a disaster.

"I just came to welcome you on board officially. Now if you will excuse me... " Picard said.

"Of course I understand. I also have a lot of work to do before we reach Starbase 73," Weiser said. The sort of work he had in mind was rewriting files that contained any reference to his former self.

Picard and Worf turned and left the room. As they did so Weiser's assistant rejoined him at the desk.

"He suspects something. Why else would he bring that *thing* in here?"

"He knows nothing, and it's going to stay that way. It's about time that I paid a visit to their sickbay."

When the door closed on them Picard turned to Worf. "Keep an eye on them."

"Sir," Worf replied. So his Captain suspected that something was wrong. If there was anything wrong Worf would find it.

"It might also be useful to visit sickbay, in case Kara remembers anything else," Picard said.

"Yes, sir." Worf wondered how he should explain his presence in sickbay.

"Start now, Lieutenant," Picard ordered. He left Worf standing there.

Picard had decided that he was going to take no chances at all. So far Kara was the only witness that they had; there had been no mention of any others on Solzar 6 - as far as he knew she was the

only one left from the camp that she had been held in.

Worf decided that the first place he should go was sickbay. He had to know more about the Klingon that Kara had helped to escape. He walked to the nearest turbolift. "Sickbay," he ordered.

When it arrived he got out and walked into sickbay. Kara was still asleep. Crusher looked at him as he entered.

"Lieutenant?" she said.

"The Captain has ordered me to watch her," he said. It was a simple enough explanation.

"She will not be awake for some time. Make yourself comfortable." Crusher checked on Kara's vital signs. They were normal.

"Doctor," Worf started to say,

"Yes, Worf?" Crusher looked at him. "What did you want to know?" she asked.

"She kept trying to touch me. Why?" he wanted to know.

"From what I know so far, she'd been kept alone for some length of time. The only kind of contact that she had was with her captors who were extremely brutal with her. Perhaps you remind her of the person that she helped to save," Crusher said.

"I see," Worf said, thinking about what the Doctor had said. Perhaps it would be advantageous to allow her to touch him, although usually he disliked any kind of physical contact.

"Make yourself comfortable while you wait for her to wake up. I had to use a high dose sedative on her," Crusher explained. Worf merely stood by the bed that Kara was lying on. He could see that her sleep was disturbed but he could only guess why.

Weiser left his quarters. He walked slowly down the corridor trying to look extremely concerned. Well, he was expected to do that, never mind the fact that she could ruin all his plans for the future if she managed to recognize him. The more concerned he looked the more they were likely to believe him and that was all that mattered for the time being. He walked into sickbay and saw Worf standing by Kara's bed.

"Doctor, I'm Dr. Weiser. How is your patient doing?" he asked Crusher.

"She's asleep at the moment. She had serious burns but they are healing well now," Crusher said.

"Why is the Lieutenant here?" he asked casually.

"She seems to trust Lt. Worf more than anyone else. Would you like to see her?" Crusher asked Weiser.

"Perhaps later when she wakes up. I wouldn't want to disturb

her just yet," he said before leaving sickbay. It was time for him to act; something would have to be planned for her.

Kara's eyes slowly opened. She could see the face of the man who had hurt her! She screamed,

"It's him!"

Worf spun round just in time to see Weiser leave sickbay.

"Calm down," Crusher said, rushing over to her bedside. "Who did you see? Tell me," she coaxed.

"Him. I kept dreaming. I couldn't see his face, then I saw him," Kara said breathlessly.

"Who?" Worf demanded.

"Western!" Kara started to cry. "Please don't let him hurt me!"

"No-one is going to hurt you," Crusher said, trying to calm her. Worf left sickbay; he strode down the corridor. He was going to find out what exactly was going on.

Weiser walked back to his room quickly. She had recognised him. Now he had to get rid of her.

"Collin, I have a little job for you," he said to his assistant.

"Yes, sir?" Collin replied.

"I want you to distract the Doctor in sickbay while I visit an old friend,"

"Yes, sir," Collin said. He knew that he would have to obey what Weiser ordered or he too would be standing trial with the others. Collin left Weiser's room. Weiser followed him, keeping a lookout for Worf. They walked back towards sickbay.

"Doctor, I am Dr. Weiser's assistant," Collin said, smiling. He watched as Weiser went over to Kara's bed.

"Hello, scum lover," Weiser whispered to Kara. She looked at him. Fear showed in her eyes.

"I don't know who you are. Tell them anything else and you die. You know I can do that," he said, smiling at her. Kara looked at him. She knew that he was telling the truth. She looked across to where Crusher was busy talking to Collin, Weiser's assistant. Couldn't she see what was happening?

"I'm not frightened of you any more," Kara said defiantly, but she wondered if her courage would hold out.

"Who's going to believe your word? I know all about you and

that alien scum." Kara tried not to look at him.

"I'm going to kill you, Western," she said loudly. Crusher looked across to Kara's bed.

"What's going on?" she demanded as she pushed her way past Collin.

"Stop him, he's Western!" Kara screamed at Crusher. Crusher looked at Weiser then at Kara. Was she telling the truth? She decided that it was best not to take any chances.

"Security to sickbay, emergency!" Crusher said into her com badge. Weiser turn to leave. He found that his way out was blocked by Worf and a security team.

"Is there a problem, Doctor?" he asked.

"Detain them both," Crusher said confidently.

"You can't do this," Weiser shouted. "I'm the head of a government! I have diplomatic immunity!" He looked at Worf. "Surely you can see that she's mad."

Worf just glared at him. "Take them to maximum security," he ordered the security team. He then walked over to where Kara was lying.

"It's over," he said.

"Not yet. I still have to testify against him," Kara said.

"There's one thing that I want to know about, and that is the Klingon that you helped to escape," Worf said looking at her.

"He was a spy sent by the Empire to see what had happened to the colonists. As far as I know he got home safely. I know his name - could you find out for me?" she asked Worf. He nodded. "It's Kurn." She looked at Worf.

"He did get home and he is safe," he said.

"Good," Kara said closing her eyes. At least she knew what had happened to him. "How do you know without checking?" she asked.

"He is my brother," Worf replied stoically.

"You're alike," Kara said.

Weiser paced up and down in his cell. Collin was of no use to him now; all he did was sit in a corner and cry. One way or another he would not stand trial,

"I want to see the Captain," he demanded.

"Silence!" Worf boomed. He stood looking into the cell, Kara at his side. She still felt nervous being this close to the man who had caused her so much pain.

"I'm innocent," Weiser protested. "It's all a big mistake. I didn't do anything."

"Why don't you beg for mercy as I did?" Kara said. There was something good about seeing him use the words that she had used to him in the camp.

"I want to tell you everything," Collin suddenly said.

Weiser looked at him. "Shut up, you fool!" he shouted.

"He is Western. He was behind experimental Lab 4. It was all his idea to use prisoners for those experiments," Collin said. "He also killed witnesses and most of the other prisoners. Some he let go." Kara looked at him.

"You will testify to this in court?" Worf asked.

"Yes. Please move me to another cell," Collin said, sounding frightened. Weiser would kill him for turning against him, but it was his only chance and he had to take it.

The Enterprise reached Starbase 73, and remained there for the duration of the preliminary hearings. Most of the accused wanted to confess in the hope that they would get better treatment. Kara sat there watching and waiting to be called. Finally she was told that she would have to travel to Earth to give her testimony. At least it was nearly over, she told herself. She walked back to the transporter station with Worf, who, she had come to realise, was a lot like his brother.

"I'll be travelling on the Constitution. It will give me time to prepare myself for the trials," she said to Worf.

"The Empire is sending a witness. He will also be travelling on the Constitution. They are also considering giving you an award for bravery," Worf said looking at her.

"Do you know who the witness is?" she asked hopefully.

"Kurn," he replied, looking behind her. She turned to see what or who he was looking at.

"You are Kara Alton," a male Klingon said. Kara merely nodded. "You know who I am," he said.

"Kurn," she said with tears running down her face.

"So you remember. You were responsible for Western being caught."

"Yes, but I couldn't have done it without your brother's help," she said.

"I will be available if you need help," Kurn said.

"Worf, thank you," Kara said hugging him.

"We have to leave now," Kurn said sternly.

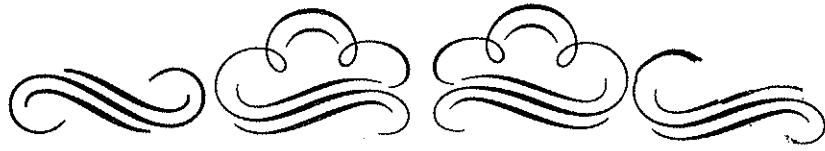
"I'm ready," Kara said as she turned to leave. As she did so she took one last look back at where Worf was standing.

"You will mention to no-one that he is my brother," Kurn warned

her.

"You should be proud of him," Kara said, smiling at Kurn.

"I am," he replied.



THE LOSS

I can't feel you!

How can mere words
Such as these
Explain what I'm feeling.

Not to feel!
Not to sense...
Experience...

Share

What is going on inside you -
Inside everyone *around* me.
How can you know
When you *never* knew?

Now perhaps I never shall again.
How can I live like this?!

Apart...
Shut out...
Banished from your lives;
From everything
That has ever made *mine*
What it has been
Up till now!

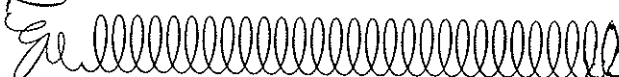
Why can't you *understand*?

What use are all
Your fumbling attempts
At so-called Human comfort
When they cannot restore
What I need most of all?
Indeed,
The only thing I value...

That which makes me
Betazoid.

That which makes me
Troi.

Sheryl Peterson



QUESTION OF JUDGEMENT

by

P. J. Poole

"Captain, the boy is at risk. You must act now."

Picard took a deep breath, and pinched the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb as he exhaled.

"Counselor, I understand what you have said, and can appreciate the urgency you attach to the situation. Having said that, you must appreciate the awkwardness of my position."

Deanna Troi looked singularly unappreciative. In fact, her exasperation was easily a match for Picard's own, reinforced as it was by her clear perception of his feelings. Turning to Beverly Crusher, she sought for support.

"Beverly, surely you can understand...?"

Crusher shrugged, feeling helpless to supply what her friend needed.

"Deanna, I've examined medical records for Kyle and for his father. Since the boy's mother left the ship 8 months ago, Dr Crawford has been to see me twice, both times complaining of difficulty sleeping, for which I prescribed a standard course of biorhythm feedback training and an extra session on the holodeck. Kyle has been in three times, once with cuts and bruises from a fall, once with a sprained wrist from a game of Parchesie Squares and yesterday with scald burns consistent with what they both claim happened - an accident with a pot of coffee from the food dispenser in their quarters. There is no really conclusive physical evidence to support what you feel is happening."

"Because the source of the problem is emotional, not physical. Raymond Crawford is an expert in the field of plant biology, and his chance to work on board the Enterprise is the pinnacle of his career. His wife was a remarkably attractive and successful entertainer who could not adjust to life on board a starship, and who left both husband and child to return to Earth, without discussing things with her husband. Consequently he feels both guilty and betrayed, ashamed and angered, and has been totally unable to resolve his feelings. He steadfastly refuses to see either myself or any of the medical psychiatric staff for help or guidance. Kyle is a bright, sensitive child of nine years who is a living reminder of what his father sees as his failure. The pressure builds and builds, and emerges as rage and violence. We must do something!"

Worf growled, and hunched forward in his chair, clearly in the grip of strong emotion.

"I concur, Counselor. To allow a child to be bullied, or indeed injured, because of the father's shortcomings is not acceptable. The question therefore is what can we do? If the child

will not accuse the father and there are no witnesses, then recourse to criminal proceedings against the man is clearly impractical. Possibly I should speak to him... privately?" The clenching of the Klingon's hands into fists lent emphasis to his words.

The three other Starfleet officers looked at Worf for several seconds, all equally startled by the vehemence of his response. Picard was first to recover and speak.

"That, Lieutenant, you will most certainly not do. We will address this situation professionally and will resolve the matter without any need for... extraordinary measures."

"Absolutely, Worf. Dr. Crawford is as much a victim as his son - we must try to help them both." Deanna added her voice to the Captain's.

"My apologies if I offended - I would still point out that my suggestion offers the most pragmatic solution for ensuring the boy's wellbeing, but I shall not act upon it, if that is what you wish."

An unspoken "Not just yet" hovered behind the Klingon's response, then faded away unremarked.

Crusher broke the small silence, speaking calmly and coolly. "We keep coming back to the fact that there is no solid physical evidence... "

Deanna broke in, frustratedly, "You have my testimony - I was in sickbay when the father brought Kyle in yesterday. The guilt and shame of the father, along with the fear, love and confusion of the son, give me a crystal clear picture of what has happened. His father's refusal to see me, and Kyle's reluctance to discuss the incident, only confirm it. Kyle loves his father, and believes that if his father hurts him it is because he has been bad and deserves to be punished... It is a classic scenario."

Picard spoke, as though explaining something obvious.

"Your testimony is inadmissible without telepathic, or at least empathic, corroboration by at least two other impartial witnesses. Witnesses that we do not have on board the Enterprise, and which would lead us into uncertain areas under Federation civil law anyway. The precedents for a Betazoid accusing a Human are uncertain enough anyway, not to mention... "

"That I am only half Betazoid? I agree, that is perhaps best left unmentioned, Captain." The ice dripped coldly from every word.

"Damn it, Deanna, I cannot interfere in a matter of this much sensitivity based solely on your feelings, no matter how much I may trust and respect your instincts in other circumstances. Not without something more solid to go on."

"Feelings. Instincts. Captain, my empathic abilities are as real and as reliable as any of your five major senses. Would you ignore me, or any of your other senior staff, if we reported seeing or hearing a child being abused?"

Picard opened his mouth to reply, but words would not come.

"Very well," said Deanna. "I shall just have to attempt to

provide you with something more solid. If you will excuse me?"

Waiting only momentarily for Picard's curt nod of permission Deanna left the briefing room in a flounce of blue material.

"I handled that badly, didn't I?" asked Picard of the two remaining officers.

"The Counselor shows a commendable zeal in carrying out what she sees as her duties," said Worf, diplomatically.

"Once she calms down, I'm sure she will know that the insult was quite unintentional," offered Beverly helpfully.

"Thank you both," replied Picard drily, then added, "this situation serves as a textbook argument against having families on board a starship, particularly single parent families, where the pressure may prove too much for the father."

"Or mother?" enquired Beverly, as the chill returned to the room.

That evening, ship's time, found Deanna in Ten-Forward, seated at the bar with a cloud of depression hovering over her like a small thunderstorm looking for a place to deluge. Ever sensitive to atmospheric disturbances, Guinan drifted over, subtly shooing away the attendant who had been about to take the order.

"Hello, Deanna. What can I get for you?"

"I need a chocolate milk shake. On second thoughts, a double chocolate milk shake, with flakes."

"Drug dependency is a terrible thing," dead panned the hostess.

"Please don't cheer me up, Guinan. It's taken me all day to get this tense and I would hate to waste it," replied Deanna.

"OK," said Guinan as she filled the order. "At least I don't have to get you to admit to being tense. You have such clear insight into your feelings it's always easy to talk to you. You wouldn't believe how hard it is for some people to tell me things."

"I probably wouldn't. Everyone on board knows you are the easiest person to open up to - it's a good thing I'm not the insecure type or I might feel threatened."

"I could never do your job. I... *listen*... and people tell me what is bothering them, then tell me what they already know is the answer. You deal with people who don't know the answer, or don't want to know the answer. I just let people go away feeling better than when they arrive. That's how my people defined 'hostess'."

"An interesting definition, and an interesting example. I have someone who does not know he has a problem, but with my abilities I know he is screaming out his need for help. Which only I can hear, and no one else can accept my word for."

"Sounds intriguing," prompted Guinan.

"Sounds confidential, and probably actionable if I named

names," replied the ship's Counselor. "What bothers me the most on a personal level is the fact that the Captain cannot accept a need to act just on my word alone. Intellectually, I know he is correct, but it feels... "

"Like a betrayal?"

"That's a harsh word for it, but yes, I suppose it fits. You have known him for years, and I know how much he respects your insights. How would you feel if you went to him and said that something was wrong on board but he refused to believe you? To act on your warning?"

"Fortunately, that's not a situation I've ever encountered, nor is it a probable one, but I suppose I would feel hurt and slighted, as though by ignoring my input he lessened the esteem I like to think he has for me... "

"Exactly!" pounced Deanna, sucking her straw emphatically.

After a moment, Guinan spoke again. "Deanna, Jean-Luc Picard is probably the single most... honourable... man I know. He believes in systems, and structures, in playing by the rules and in fair play, but more than anything he believes in the spirit behind those things, in justice and the ideal. If for whatever reason he cannot act on your word alone then I will stake my life that he will move heavens and worlds to act in some other way."

"You believe that?"

"Count on it!"

"I think I do... You make a good hostess. I certainly feel better than when I arrived."

"Good. Can I make you laugh now?"

Deanna arched one graceful eyebrow in enquiry.

"Have you heard about Data's cat?"

"Data's... cat?!?" giggled Deanna in tones of one suspecting a very bad punch line.

"After his failure with Lal, he thought it might be better to resume his work with a simpler set of patterns for a positronic brain, so he got together with Geordi, Barclay and O'Brien and they are trying to build a cat!"

"To *build* a cat?"

"You heard right!"

"But how will they program the poor thing?"

"O'Brien persuaded that cute Japanese friend of his in Life Sciences to lend them one of theirs. Data is looking after it."

Deanna suddenly grinned wickedly. "Maybe the Captain could help?"

"You lost me."

"Well, after his fond memories of ships in bottles, he should be good with construction kitties..."

Captain Picard had more pressing concerns on his mind than model ships or artificial felines, though. His meeting with Deanna and the others had preyed on his mind for the rest of the day, sufficiently so that he had made time in his schedule to review his legal options regarding the situation Deanna had reported. Starfleet procedures were woefully lacking in good advice for the situation, and civil administration of Federation laws aboard the Enterprise were more concerned with criminal than social legalities. His only real option of legality seemed to be to invoke Avalonian civil laws, since that was Crawford's planet of registry, and to take the boy into protective guardianship before handing both child and parent over to the authorities on a Starbase. He smiled at the thought of handing such a package over to someone like Phillippa Louvois. She had always made him look like an expert where children were concerned. Memories of the boy Jono wiped the smile away. Unpalatable as the thought was, Deanna would not have raised the matter unless she were certain, certain beyond all doubt that the boy was at risk from his father's emotional state... Not on his ship. Not, by God, on his ship!

Finding a pretext on which to visit Dr. Crawford had not been difficult; as Captain he was constantly being invited to attend various meetings held by the scientists amongst the Enterprise's civilian complement, all of whom seemed to Picard to spend as much time jockeying for position, lab space and computer resource as any group of senior academics in a planetside university. As a rule, Picard left the matter in the hands of the three-person administrative council, occasionally throwing Riker to the wolves if all else failed, but a forthcoming seminar on the blight which decimated crops on Sherman's planet seemed tailor-made as a reason to request a meeting with the ship's foremost plant biologist.

Deliberately, Picard manoeuvred the time and location of the meeting so that he would be seeing Crawford in his quarters rather than in his lab.

As he entered the lounge area he was impressed by the size of Dr. Crawford, a man slightly taller than Picard himself, with dark hair and beard, who in twenty years might well bear a passing resemblance to Lt. Worf's foster father.

Crawford had clearly been in one of the the other rooms when Picard arrived, and was holding a child's picture book in his hand as he waved the Captain to a seat.

"Shan't be a minute," he said hastily, leaving the lounge to reappear several minutes later, sans literature.

"Just settling down my youngster," explained the scientist. "I like to read to him in the evening. Today's been particularly hectic for him, he spent last night in sick bay you know."

"Nothing serious, I trust?" enquired Picard innocently.

"Damn fool accident yesterday, knocked over the coffee pot and scalded himself, but nothing your excellent Dr. Crusher couldn't fix right up."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Please, do sit down."

"Certainly. I was just admiring the pictures."

Indeed, for anyone in the room it was virtually impossible not to admire, or at least be faced by, the pictures - all of the same beautiful woman, taken over a period of years. The centrepiece was a lovingly framed triptych of the woman as a young girl in the centre, in a wedding dress with Crawford to one side and cradling a baby on the third panel. The display was on a shelf beneath a carefully illuminated holostill of the woman in ballet costume, caught timelessly in a leap of breathtaking elegance and style. The image came to Picard of a shrine, lovingly maintained, for a deity long departed.

"They do not do her justice, they cannot, but they give Kyle and me something to remember her by."

"It seems a shame for us all that life on board the Enterprise did not suit your wife. I'm sure our ballet classes would have benefitted greatly from her input."

"After being prima ballerina for two years with an interstellar troupe, I fear that ...enthusiastic amateurs would not have been of great interest to Jessica."

"Indeed. Perhaps not. Tell me, has your wife returned to the stage?"

"I do not know."

"Ahh... I see."

Picard's embarrassed silence and Crawford's sombre brooding were interrupted by the sound of a young boy saying, "Daddy - may I have a drink of water?"

Turning, the men saw that the boy was standing in the doorway, clad in purple pyjamas and rubbing tousled hair with a hand that showed the too pink healthiness of freshly regenerated tissue.

Crawford sighed, the eternal sigh of the parent presented with childish artifice.

"Kyle, you know perfectly well how to get yourself a drink of water. What you are actually asking is to be introduced to the Captain, and if possible to stay up well past your bedtime."

The elfin grin, the down-turned eyes and the scuffing of one foot against the other were as good as a signed confession.

Crawford sighed good humouredly. "Very well. Captain Picard, my son, Kyle, who will be leaving us very shortly."

As the face turned up and shy eyes met his own gaze, Picard felt the old familiar blankness glaze over him, as articulate intelligence gave way to tongue-tied stupidity.

"Ahhhhh... hello, um, Kyle. I'm very pleased to meet such a, um, fine young man."

"Hello, Captain. My daddy says you got turned into a Borg once, but Dr. Crusher made you better again, just like she did me! What was it like?"

Somehow Picard stumbled through an interminable five minutes of childish questions before salvation came as Dr. Crawford swept up his child in his arms and carried him off to bed.

Fortunately he had recovered his composure before the scientist returned.

"My apologies for that, Captain, but he would have been so disappointed not to have met you. I fear I spoil the child at times, but all parents do."

"So I believe. I must confess, my own exposure to children is... quite limited."

"Of course, so few starship captains ever marry. Married to your ships, I suppose, at the risk of sounding cliched."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps the right woman never came along, or came along and got away."

"Another cliché. For myself, there was only ever Jess. She was all a man could want, even if in the final analysis I was not what she... deserved."

"That sounds unduly harsh on yourself, if I might say so, Doctor. All people make the choices in their lives for a multitude of tangled reasons. My own sessions with Deanna Troi have taught me that."

Crawford had been absently holding the triptych of his wife as they spoke, turning it and stroking it as some might fondle a rosary or worry beads, but now he stopped and focussed puzzled attention on the Captains words.

"Your sessions with... Do you mean counselling sessions, Captain? I would have thought..."

"What? That a captain would have no need of emotional counselling? Not at all, I assure you. Indeed, after the... unpleasantness... your son mentioned, it was only Deanna's professional help that kept me sane. I was shattered by what had happened, so full of pain and rage, so convinced that it was my fault, or it was due to some flaw or weakness in my character that those things had happened in my life... It is difficult to describe how much I needed her help. In fact, at one point during my vacation on Earth, I actually picked a fight with my brother! A real knock-down brawl where I just had so much bottled up rage to express that it could only find release in violence!"

"Amazing! Not only that it happened at all, but that you can speak of it so easily. On Avalon, we find it hard to speak of our feelings, especially those that reveal our own... shortcomings."

"And yet the love you feel for your son and for your wife shows so clearly in your every action tonight."

Crawford by now was growing ever more agitated, pacing and turning the triptych over and over in his hands, not affectionately but distractedly now.

"For my son, yes; to love one's son is only right, and my wife - I know it must seem strange, with her leaving us, but I love her still. I have to love her still, it's just that... I... miss... her... so much. I miss her."

Oblivious now to Picard's presence, Crawford spoke instead to the holo on the wall.

"Damn you to hell, I miss you so much, and I don't know why you left or where you are now, or what you were thinking of... I miss you!"

The final three words came out garbled as the man's voice raised, almost but not quite covering the sound of the triptych frame snapping in his strong, capable hands. The sound seemed to bring him back to himself as he turned to Picard with puzzlement in his eyes, holding out the two parts of the broken ornament.

"I seem to have broken this... and I don't know how to fix it..."

"Let me help. Let *us* help. It's what friends are for."

Placing his arm around the man's now heaving shoulders, Picard activated his communicator badge with a deft tap of his fingertips.

"Picard to Counselor Troi."

A pause, broken only by the heavy breathing of the man.

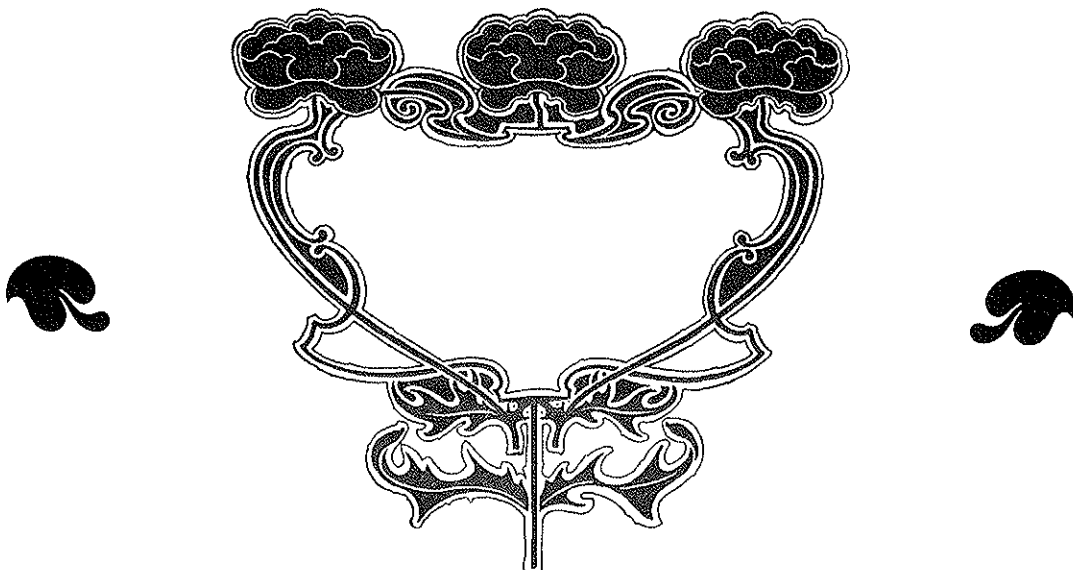
"Troi here, Captain?"

"My apologies for the hour, Counselor, but I have Dr Crawford with me. I believe he would like to see you, about a personal matter."

Crawford met the Captain's enquiring gaze, and then nodded, once, emphatically.

Curiosity and respect vied with professionalism in Deanna's reply.

"Of course, Captain. I'll meet you in my office, and there's no need to apologise for anything at all. To help is why I am here."



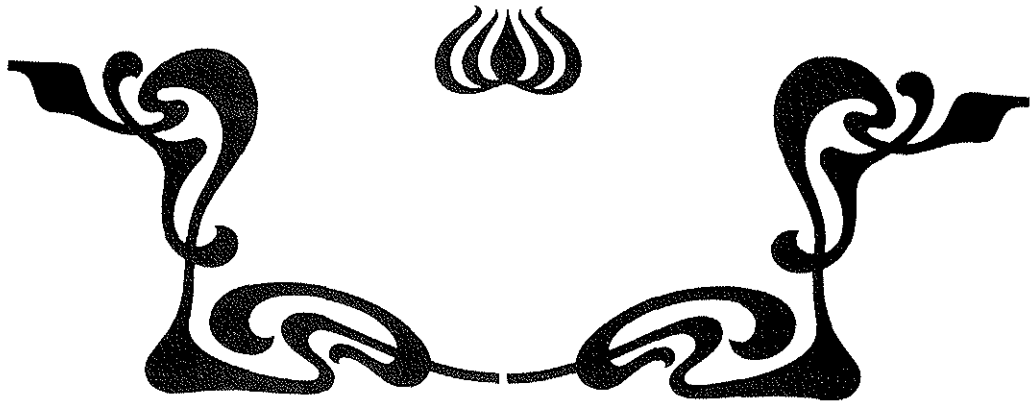
TIN MAN

They do not understand.
 But then how could they?
 When they are the very voices
 Destroying me.
 Day and night...
 Without end...
 Without rest...
 Wherever I go across the galaxy,
 There is no peace
 For I cannot hide from them.
 They are always part of me
 So I can never be alone.
 Even now, when no one speaks,
 The voices are there in my head,
 Pressing...
 Demanding...
 Slowly killing me!
 Only Data is restful
 Yet even he... thinks.

But you are different...
 You do not demand.
 You are only... lonely,
 Like I am.
 Like I have always been!
 You want nothing but to die,
 To end the pain,
 To end the loneliness
 Of being lost in a universe
 That has no place left for you,
 And never will again,
 For your kind have died out,
 And no one understands,
 Or even cares...
 But I do!
 I feel you...
 You reach out to me,
 Blindly seeking help
 Even while you prepare to die,
 Wanting comfort
 This one, last time.
 For death is the loneliest thing of all.
 And you are afraid...
 Underneath the tiredness,
 Underneath the pain.
 And I must go to you,
 To be one with you,
 To share what I have never
 Been able to share before!
 Only Data can possibly know
 What I am searching for,
 As the Enterprise prepares
 To face you,
 Or destroy you.
 To them you are only a mission.
 An alien object
 To be made use of,

Or destroyed,
 Whichever way they choose.
 They have named you Tin Man.
 I call you Brother,
 And think of you as my last hope...
 My final sanctuary...
 Even if it's only
 To die with you,
 I must find you,
 And become one.

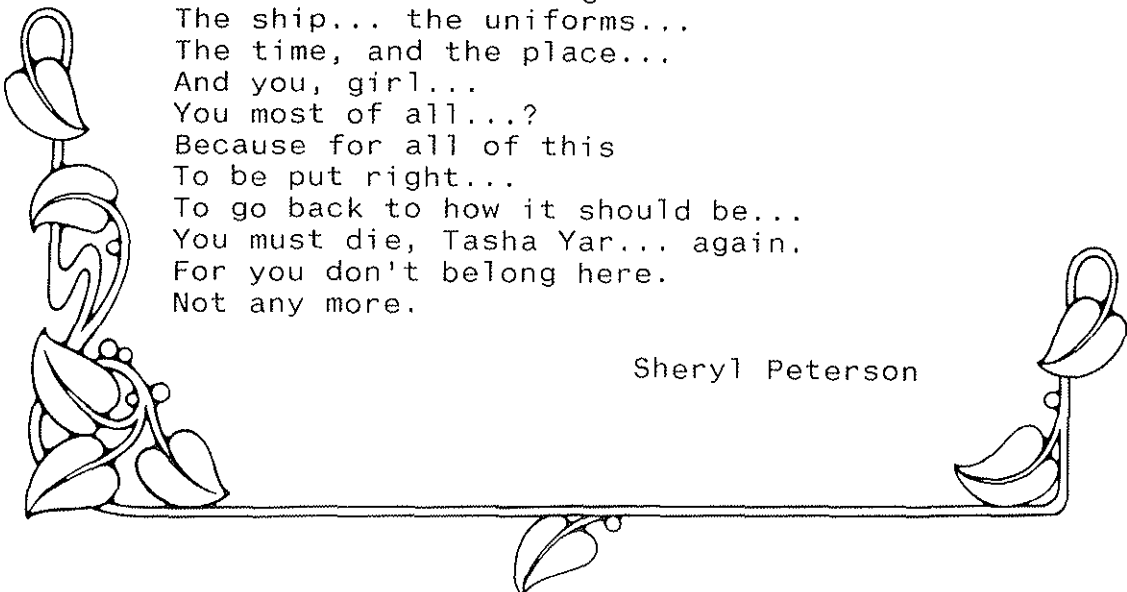
Sheryl Peterson



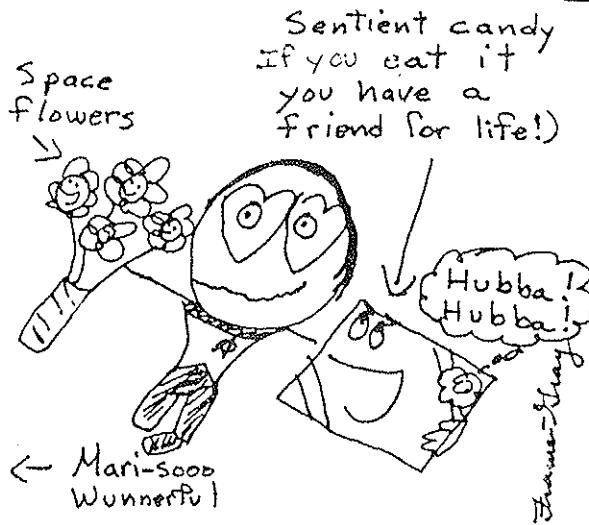
HERE TODAY...

You don't belong here.
 Even now as I look at you
 Across the bridge,
 And see you standing there...
 So fair, so full of life,
 With all the zeal of the warrior
 Born only to serve
 That which she has chosen
 Shining in your eyes.
 What still, small whisper in my heart
 Tells me mercilessly
 That this is all wrong...
 The ship... the uniforms...
 The time, and the place...
 And you, girl...
 You most of all...?
 Because for all of this
 To be put right...
 To go back to how it should be...
 You must die, Tasha Yar... again.
 For you don't belong here.
 Not any more.

Sheryl Peterson



Data stories I'm
tired of reading...



Data falls in love

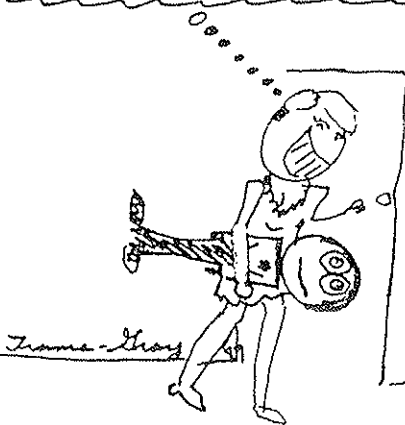
Data rescues a cat
out of a Tree....

Gee, should we tell Data
we couldn't find any kittens
so we had to use a
Klingonease Killer Tribble
instead, Commander Riker?



Mary Sue falls in lust*

I can't hardly wait
to check out his 3 speeds!



*Or in this case, Tasha Yar.
After all, practice
makes perfect!

Data commands
The Bridge... sort of...

Yessiree! That "LT. Commander"
makes a great doorstop!



Data
Unconscious
(again)

THAT WHICH HUNGERS

by

Gaile Wood

The distress signal finally worked. Her numb fingers had seized up at the knuckles and joints. She blew on her hands, rubbing them again in a vain attempt to make them work properly.

It seemed like hours ago that she had carefully wrapped her two children in the largest blankets she could and took them to a place only she knew about. A small supply of water and food was already secreted for them, and she gave instructions to her ten year old daughter to stay put - no matter what.

Leaving them at last, she waited. Waited and waited. IT would be here soon. The hunter, stalker - eater of lives, of souls, of men. IT.

The woman crouched with the phaser rifle clutched desperately in her hands; not because she thought she could kill IT - no, because she thought she would be able to distract it from the children. For that she would gladly sacrifice her life.

And so she waited.

Waited until her finger on the trigger cramped - until her thigh muscles trembled with the effort of remaining still. Waited until her neck was stiff, her eyes gluey from staring into the deep night - a night that went on forever. And she talked in low tones to her friends - her poor dead friends, who were better off than she.

There. Something moved in the darkness. Shifting her position oh, so slightly, towards the direction the noise came from, and creeping forward, she cocked her head and listened. THERE!

She ran, firing as she went, the bright beam of the weapon briefly illuminating a small area of open ground. She saw IT then, following. Fear gave her feet wings, and she gasped for breath, her heart pounding in her chest. It did not matter now.

IT followed, playing with her. A cat with a mouse - a tiger with its prey; allowing her to run, letting her think there was a chance of escape - a moment of hope. A cruel game of tag - of hide and seek.

Then IT had her, and IT fed.

The last crystal notes of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 washed over Jean-Luc Picard and, as one with the audience, he rose to his feet applauding a breathtakingly brilliant performance.

To his right, William Riker clapped as loudly as the rest.
"Bravo!"

"Encore!" Picard called, his voice lost in the countless dozens making the same request.

The soloist moved away from the piano, and took a bow, low and deep. He indicated the orchestra, and the assemblage went into fresh raptures of appreciation.

At last the applause died away, allowing the artiste to go behind the wings and the house to start an orderly retreat towards the exits.

Picard smiled and hummed a small piece from the concert. "What did you think, Will?"

Riker did not hesitate. "Brilliant. The man is a genius. How about you, Data?"

The android officer considered carefully. "I believe Mr. Nelson has a very emotive personality, and it is reflected in his performance."

"Did you *enjoy* it, Data?" Riker was amused.

"Oh, yes. Very much. He is also technically faultless."

Behind them, a low voice said, "I too was impressed."

Picard turned his head to regard Worf. "You like music?"

"Some," Worf replied.

Picard and Riker shared a look. Both had been considerably surprised when Worf announced he would take the opportunity to go with them to the performance - this being the first time he had availed himself of the recreational facilities - while the rest of the crew took some well-earned R & R.

"Did this enter that category?" Riker was curious

The Klingon inclined his head. "I also felt Mr. Nelson gave one of his better performances."

"Praise indeed," said Picard.

They approached the exits now; the rest of the audience was filing out in an orderly fashion talking animatedly amongst themselves. Once the four of them were in the foyer, Picard indicated they follow him up some stairs.

The theatre was built to twentieth century specifications, and the feeling the building conveyed was of age. It even had the relevant anachronisms - red flock wallpaper, wall lights and, of course, stairs.

They trooped along some corridors, and eventually came to a door where a man stood. He waved them through, and they found themselves behind the stage.

Data observed the frenetic activity with interest. People hurried, brushing past them without so much as a second glance. He gawked openly, then realized he had been left behind. He made haste to catch up with the others.

Finally, Captain Picard stopped outside a door with a name plate on it in gold. He knocked, and they all waited with varying degrees of patience.

A well-modulated voice called out. "Come in please."

Picard opened the door and stepped through into a large dressing-room, where a dark, bearded man sat in front of a table and large mirror. The mirror had lights around it, Picard noted. *Not everything was anachronistic then*, he mused.

Rising, Alexander Nelson was seen to be a man of medium build - quite ordinary - until his eyes fell upon people. They were piercingly blue and missed nothing. His gaze was shrewd, tempered with humour and wisdom.

"Well, gentlemen," he said softly. "Please be seated." He indicated some comfortable sofas placed against the wall. "Captain Picard, would you and your officers care for refreshments while you wait for the rest of my party?"

"Thank you, Mr. Nelson - for myself, I accept," Picard glanced at the others. "Gentlemen?"

Data demurred; Riker and Worf accepted the offer. Glass in hand, Picard said, "A truly remarkable performance, Mr. Nelson. Delightful. I can say without doubt that we enjoyed your recital thoroughly."

Nelson smiled. "I am glad, Captain. One strives to perfect one's art, and it is always gratifying to hear others appreciate the effort."

They talked amongst themselves for a while, going over the concert in some detail, only stopping when the door opened again to allow in some new faces.

"Allow me to introduce three of my party - my wife will be making her own way to the Enterprise after arrangements for the quartet and our instruments have been finalised." Nelson turned to a tall, blond man, who inclined his head towards them. "Tom Jeffries - double bass and tenor." He indicated the Vulcan in the group. "Sundar - viola and violin."

Sundar saluted the officers impassively. "Live long and prosper."

"And last, but by no means least, Gabriella Maxwell. Violinist and soprano."

The diminutive young woman bowed, and smiled at the four of them. She winked at Data, who was taken aback.

Nelson, observing the wink, admonished her gently. "Ella! Forgive her, she is sometimes a little... *forward*."

"Alex - you make me sound like some kind of kid." Maxwell sounded slightly indignant.

Nelson sighed very faintly, and cast a glance at Picard somewhat apologetically. "If we could go now, Captain, I would be grateful."

"Of course," said Picard. "I wonder if I may impose upon you again at some stage of our journey?"

"You, and any others." Nelson included all four men in his gaze. "Yes, I believe my wife and I would enjoy some stimulating company."

"Very well," Picard tapped his communicator. "Picard to main transporter - eight to beam up."

The reply came. "Aye, sir. Transporting now."

They dematerialised, and Picard soon felt his feet begin to solidify on the transporter pad. He stepped off the platform, and turning to Nelson and his entourage, said, "Worf will take you to your quarters. I hope you will find them satisfactory." He smiled at them, but held out his hand to Nelson. "I just want to say that we on the Enterprise are pleased we could be of service to you. It is an honour."

Nelson took the proffered hand. "And we are grateful the Enterprise was available."

Releasing Nelson, Picard turned to Riker. "I shall be in my quarters, Number One - the Enterprise is yours for a time."

"Sir," said Riker. "Data, come with me. Worf, take Mr. Nelson and his party. Deliver them safely. Good evening - and I repeat all the Captain just said."

They left, leaving Worf with his charges. "If you will come with me."

As they followed the Klingon, the musicians looked around curiously. The Enterprise had been their last hope of getting to their next scheduled concert on time, and none of them had ever been on a Galaxy Class Starship before. Commercial ships were built more specifically for comfort, not for the practical purposes of exploration.

After a short and silent ride in a turbolift, Ella Maxwell glanced sidelong at Worf. "Tell me, er - " she settled at last on what to call him - "Lieutenant - how many people live on board?"

"Permanently?" He continued to walk.

"Yes."

Worf considered. "It varies - but in the region of one thousand."

Tom Jeffries, who had been silent until then, gave a long low whistle. "It varies?"

Worf nodded, aware he had an interested audience. "Staff come and go. The number of children varies, and so forth." He stopped abruptly. "Mr. Nelson, these are your quarters."

"Thank you. And my fellow musicians?"

"Are also on this deck, just a little further along."

As stipulated, Worf delivered his charges safely, then made his

way to the bridge.

All was as it should be, and he took up his accustomed place at the tactical console, displacing the ensign standing there.

Captain Picard acknowledged his presence. "Has Mr. Nelson's wife come aboard yet?"

"No, sir," Worf replied.

"I hope we will not have to wait too long - we have a tight schedule." Picard drummed his fingers impatiently on his chair.

Riker said, "I'll talk to Mr. Nelson about the delay, sir."

He was saved from doing so by the welcome interruption of O'Brien's voice. "O'Brien to bridge. Mr. Nelson's wife is now aboard."

"Thank you, Chief," said Riker.

Picard sat back, and relaxed. "Excellent. Mr. Crusher, lay in a course for Thebian IV."

"Course laid in, sir."

Raising his hand in his customary gesture, the Captain said, "Engage."

At last those who felt able to reflect on their enjoyable last hours did so. All systems reported normal, and all they had to do was drop the musicians at Thebian IV in ten days before continuing on their way to Sector 14. It seemed a bit of an anticlimax.

Therefore, two days into their journey, Worf registered with some relief an incoming signal. As Picard was enjoying the company of the civilian guests, Riker sat in the command chair.

The Klingon said, "Commander, I have a distress signal coming from Sector 17."

Riker angled his head towards Worf. "Let's hear it, Lieutenant."

The signal was not very clear, wavering in frequency, with the visual image accompanying it fragmented by static interference.

Riker squinted at the screen. "Can you do anything about that, Worf?"

"The signal is already boosted, sir." Worf fiddled with a few more controls, and the screen cleared long enough for the message to become clear.

A woman, dirty and unkempt, holding a rifle her eyes wild, spoke urgently. "If anybody hears this... " Her voice broke, and she sounded on the verge of hysteria. She visibly gathered herself. "Please help us - please, please... Somebody send some help. We've been wiped out - oh, dear Lord, no!" She disappeared off the screen.

Worf was unable to hold the message any longer, and to Riker's unspoken question, he shook his head.

"Where in Sector 17?" Riker asked finally.

"It seems to be - " Worf checked the console - "coming from Pteros II. A fairly well-established colony."

Riker nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Worf. Captain to the bridge." He addressed Data. "Can you give me a lowdown?"

Data's face acquired a blank look as he accessed his banks for the information. "Pteros II - gravity, atmosphere and planetary size within Earth norms. Population at present: 751." He re-focused on Riker. "A farming colony, sir."

Picard walked through the turbolift doors in time to hear what Data had to say. He glanced at Riker. "What do we have, Number One?"

As Riker filled him in on what had gone before, the Captain ran a hand over his forehead. "Put me through to Mr. Nelson."

Nelson's features appeared, and he regarded Picard calmly. "Yes, Captain, how may I help you?"

Picard said, "Mr. Nelson, I am afraid there will be an unavoidable delay in your delivery to Thebian. We have received information we have no choice but to act on immediately."

The musician inclined his head very slightly. "I see. Do you have an estimate of how long this delay might take?"

Picard glanced at his officers. "No - at present we do not have enough information. We will, however, keep you notified."

"My thanks, Captain."

Nelson's visage was replaced by the starfield.

"Head for Pteros II." Picard ordered. "Let's see what's going on."

At the con, Wesley Crusher replied promptly, "Yes, sir."

On Pteros II, the beast waited patiently. And while IT waited IT slavered... and hungered.

The Enterprise orbited Pteros, a hospitable, blue-green world with a swirling complement of cloud cover, enough like Earth to cause feelings of homesickness in the crew.

In the briefing-room, Picard sat with his staff around the table. Since arriving, he had found they were facing a real emergency. Counselor Troi was very distressed - she had not been able to sense anybody on the planet surface, and Data was unable to say what had happened.

Picard rubbed his eyes wearily. "An away team, Number One?"

Riker nodded, his expression grim. "Worf, Data, myself and the Counselor. If there's anyone alive down there, she'll be able to

let us know."

"What could have happened to make 700 plus people disappear into thin air?" asked La Forge. "Surely, Data, you must have some idea of what's happened?"

The Chief of Engineering had been called to give a report regarding possible malfunctions in the Enterprise's scanning systems; he had been unable to find anything, and was as concerned as the rest of them.

Data shook his head in response to the Engineer's questions. "I am unable to form a cogent theory, as I do not have enough data available."

All the staff subsided into an uneasy silence, and waited for Picard to make the next move.

"Commander," the Captain said, "please prepare the away team, and assemble in transporter room four. Make certain you are adequately armed."

"Agreed," Riker said, then he rose and indicated that Data and Worf should follow him. Tapping his communicator, he carried on, "Counselor Troi report to transporter room four."

The three officers walked from the briefing room and stepped into the turbolift. As they arrived at their destination the sound of footsteps reached them, and Deanna Troi joined the party. All of them wore morose expressions - things did not look promising.

Worf had already made sure they carried suitable weaponry, and he checked them over to satisfy himself all was in order.

At last Riker gave the signal for them to assemble on the transporter pad. "Ready to beam down, Captain."

"Thank you, Number One."

Riker nodded at the ensign. "Go."

The four of them materialised in a street, and into a low constant tinkling. The noise was just background - *almost* subliminal but not quite. Worf and Data started to take tricorder readings, not knowing what to expect.

"Gentlemen?" asked Riker. Concerned about Troi, he turned to see how she was bearing up.

Troi stood a little distance from the three males and concentrated. "This was the area the message came from, wasn't it, Worf?"

The Klingon glanced at Troi. "Yes."

Data swept his instrument in a wide arc. "Sir, the tricorder readings indicate Human DNA approximately 250 metres in that direction." Data pointed towards the end of the street, where they could see it came to an end, branching off into a gravelly open area and further along becoming a grassy field.

"Worf," Riker asked, "what do you get?"

"Confirmed, sir," Worf replied. He strode purposefully off in the direction indicated.

The others followed as one towards the field. Once reached, Data checked his tricorder again. "There," he pointed at what appeared, to all intents and purposes, to be a piece of rag lying a few metres from them.

Riker glanced at Worf silently, and the big Klingon moved to investigate.

"Commander - it is the remains of a Human," he stated. "Female." Crouching down, Worf took a closer look, and Riker joined him.

Riker shared an incredulous look with Worf. "What in God's name could do that?"

"Something big, with very sharp teeth," the Security Chief observed.

"Riker to Enterprise."

"Number One," Picard said. "You've found something?"

"Sir - yes, we've found a cadaver - " he paused - "at least, what's left of a cadaver."

"What's left...? "

"It appears to have been eaten. Whether that was the cause of death, I can't speculate until Dr. Crusher has done an autopsy."

"There is enough for that purpose then?"

"Yes, sir," said Riker.

"In that case, Commander, the sooner the Doctor gets to work on the remains, the better. Arrange for transportation."

"Aye, sir," replied Riker. He nodded at Worf, who contacted the transporter room, and tapping his combadge again he said, "Riker to Dr. Crusher. Prepare for specimen directly transporting to pathology labs."

Crusher's voice sounded dry. "Thanks, Commander. A postmortem is just what I had in mind to start the day off nicely."

Riker sighed. "Sorry about that, Bev. We'd appreciate some fast answers."

Dr. Crusher then addressed the Klingon. "Worf, I want you to make sure nothing in the area is touched. I'll be sending Ensign Dawes to examine the immediate surroundings, ready for forensics."

"As you wish, Doctor," Worf said. He set about sealing off the area.

The corpse had already gone when Dawes materialised.

Leaving the Ensign to begin her work, the away team started to

check out the small conglomeration of houses where they had found themselves.

All were ominously quiet. After Data had searched the fifth home in a row with no sign of its occupants, he came back out into the dim winter sunlight to rejoin his colleagues. "Nothing," he said.

"Counselor," asked Riker, "what about you? Have you got any impressions about the place?"

Troi shuddered, and stepped a little closer to Riker and Data. "This is a terrible place - something awful has happened here." She concentrated, a line appearing on her smooth brow. "There is life - but it's not Human." Then Troi shook her head, "I just don't know - it's horrible... I - I can't get much."

Worf grunted. "If the corpse we found is any indication of what happened to the populace, 'horrible' is not descriptive enough."

Riker was thoughtful. "But there is something you've not come across before, Deanna?" As she nodded briefly in agreement, he speculated, "The dismemberment may have been caused by animals after death?"

Data disagreed firmly. "No, sir, I do not believe there are any carrion eaters native to Pteros large enough to cause the damage sustained. It is more likely the deceased met death by coming into contact with a predator."

"So far," Worf interrupted, "we can account for one colonist. We must find out about the others." He moved off impatiently.

Riker watched him go, then turned to Troi. "Do you feel okay?"

"Well enough," she said, and changed the subject. "What *is* that noise?"

"Irritating, isn't it?" Riker remarked. "S'funny, but I'd stopped noticing it until you just reminded me." He called over to Worf, who was emerging from yet another building. "Any idea where the sound is coming from?"

Worf shook his head after he had checked the tricorder again. "It is not registering, Commander, as being physical in nature, or, indeed, as coming from any one direction." Then crossing back to Riker and Troi, he continued, "It comes from all around us."

The three of them shared a look.

"Data!" Riker shouted.

The android's startled head came into sight from behind a wall. "Sir?"

"This noise, Data - what d'you make of it?"

Puzzled, Data said, "What noise might that be, Commander?"

Troi gazed at Riker. "Telepathy?"

He shrugged. "Could be. Your guess is as good as mine -

better than mine, I would say."

"In that case," the Betazoid said, "who or what is causing it?"

"Commander!" Data's voice was urgent.

Riker ran over to him, and was joined by Worf. "What've you found, Data?"

"It would appear to be a storage room of sorts," Data replied, and moved away from the hole in the ground he had uncovered so the Commander could take a clearer view. Beside it rested a large piece of metal, which had been covering the entrance. He had had to clear a fair amount of debris also, as if it had been deliberately hidden. Down the hole led a flight of wooden stairs; there was a peculiar odour coming up them.

Troi stood beside them, and took a deep breath. She gagged, then put a hand over her mouth. "I'm just going over here." She moved away.

Worf started gingerly down the steps, and Riker followed closely behind. The further into the cellar they got, the worse the stench became. As Worf reached the last stair the cellar became illuminated. He took a long look around.

He was silent for many moments; finally Riker said impatiently, "What do you see?"

"The mystery concerning the missing colonists would appear to be partially resolved," Worf's tone was expressionless, and he moved further into the storage room so Riker could see for himself.

Clenching his teeth together, Riker attempted to filter the appalling stench. He almost lost the battle - and his breakfast. "Christ!"

"Indeed," said Worf.

'Storage room' was apt, thought Riker. Around them were the remains of countless bodies. Some were in an advanced state of decay, others not quite so bad; presumably these had been among the last to die, and, indeed, the cool dry climate would have helped to stop the decomposition. He wanted out, and quickly.

Riker tapped Worf on the arm to gain his attention. "Let's get some air," he suggested.

Worf nodded in agreement. They turned and went back the way they had come.

Troi looked at them both - even Worf was pale. "Bad?" The single word conveyed everything she was feeling.

Data, meanwhile, had disappeared while Riker and Worf were examining his initial find, and was staring intently at his tricorder again. He marched off rapidly towards the place he was receiving the life readings from. They were very feeble - almost unnoticeable - and he started to run swiftly as one of the readings began to fade even as he watched.

Data reached an outcropping of rocks just at the outskirts of the village. There seemed to have been a recent fall which had

obscured the mouth of a cave. It was from this cave the android was receiving the indications of life.

Putting the tricorder down in a safe place, Data started to move the rubble with his hands. Pausing, he yelled, "Over here!" Then he continued to dig.

Hearing his call, Worf and Riker raced to where the sound of the android's voice was coming from. Skidding to a halt, they began to help Data who was digging energetically.

After a few moments of feverish excavation, Worf stood and flexed his arms. He glanced at his companions. "Phaser?"

"No need," Data answered. "I believe we have penetrated far enough." The hole was just large enough to allow him entry.

"The life readings are very faint," said Worf urgently.

Data squeezed into the cave. "There are two children in here, Commander."

Riker moved with alacrity to the opening. "Kids? How are they?"

The android's voice was muffled as he replied, "The prognosis does not appear to be good, sir."

Data put a slight body out through the hole feet first. Gently, he supported the child's head and shoulders as Riker took the girl from his arms.

The android emerged from the cave with another bundle, and at a swift glance from the First Officer, he shook his head very slightly.

"Dead?" Worf asked.

"We were too late," the android stated solemnly.

Riker stared at the pitiful corpse in Data's arms, and reached out a finger to the small, still face. The baby had been no more than perhaps eighteen months old, but the circumstance of his passing was etched in the sunken cheeks.

They made their way back to Troi without a word. She took the girl child from Riker. "She's just hanging on. We must get her to sickbay, Bill - before she goes too."

The Commander said, "Riker to sickbay. We have a casualty for you: female, approximate age nine. Borderline hypothermic - " he checked the child's skin and eyes - "and almost certainly dehydrated."

Riker could see Data's expression of agreement with the diagnosis from the corner of his eyes.

"Acknowledged, sir," replied an anonymous voice from sickbay.

"Transporter," Riker touched the child's face again, "two to beam up."

Troi and the child dissolved and were gone.

Silently, Riker walked away from Worf and Data. He stood gazing out at the desolate village, and running a hand through his hair, rubbed his eyes. Touching his insignia, he said, "Riker to Picard."

"Number One?"

"Captain," he began, "whatever has happened here I can't begin to guess at. The whole community appears to have been wiped out."

"Speculation, Will?"

"None, sir, unless you want a wild guess. Too unlikely to be wild animals - there seems to be an intelligence at work here." Riker hesitated. "At present we've found one survivor from the colony; we also have a number of decomposed bodies, but we have not arrived at a total yet. I don't think we've found all of them - who knows, perhaps there are other survivors."

Picard was silent, then said, "Come back, Commander. You've done all you can for the present." He went on, "I think a meeting is in order."

Riker agreed readily. "Aye, sir."

Back on board the Enterprise, the senior staff sat waiting for Troi.

Entering the observation lounge, the Betazoid took a seat beside Riker. She smiled briefly at them all. "You'll be pleased to hear our small guest is now stable. Dr. Crusher is very satisfied with her progress."

"Has she regained consciousness yet?" asked Worf.

"Briefly," said Troi, "but she is sleeping now."

The Klingon folded his arms and sat back in his chair. "I shall need to speak with her."

Picard nodded. "She may have useful information."

Troi was staring at Worf. "You? You'll frighten her - she needs -"

Worf interrupted. "True." He glowered at Troi. "I will attempt *not* to frighten her."

Riker placed his hand on Troi's forearm. "Worf's doing his job, Deanna. We need all the material we can get."

"May I suggest," said Data, "Counselor Troi be the one to interview the child, with Lt. Worf present only as an observer. Then the Counselor will be able to ensure she is not stressed."

Worf grunted. "Satisfactory?"

Troi nodded mutely.

"About this possible telepathy?" Picard changed the subject abruptly. "Counselor?"

Troi thought carefully before replying. "It was something we all noticed, I believe, but it soon became apparent that exposure negated the sensation. A form of 'mind-noise', Captain."

"We realised its nature when we became aware Data couldn't hear it," Riker stated.

"I see," said Picard. "And there was no sign of what killed the colonists?"

"None," supplied Worf.

The doors to the briefing room swished open, and Beverly Crusher walked in to join them. She took a place at the table.

"Doctor," Picard greeted her.

"I've got the autopsy report - I think you'll find it interesting."

"Please continue," said Picard. "I'm certain it will be."

Crusher looked round the table. "The remains were female, and we have been able to obtain a positive identification using DNA matching." She addressed the computer. "Display hologram of Patricia Merchant - Agricultural Specialist, Pteros II."

Everyone leaned forward in their chairs. The image displayed was one they recognised.

Worf said, "The woman who sent the distress signal."

"Indeed." The Captain propped his chin in a hand.

Crusher went on. "Display cease." As the image disappeared, she took them all in in her gaze. "The dismemberment occurred shortly before death took place - it looks as if whatever had her played with her for a while. The other marks on the body - " she indicated the computer to display, and a simulacrum rotated slowly - "are merely teeth marks. Pardon, Commander - "

Riker cleared his throat and glanced at Worf. "Something big, with lots of teeth?"

Crusher eyed him. "Exactly. The cause of death was probably shock from blood loss, as the dismemberment was not very efficient."

"Have you been able to derive anything else of use from the postmortem, Doctor?" asked Data.

Crusher shook her head regretfully. "What we need to know, Data, is not easily inferred from widely scattered remains such as these. I'm no expert in medical jurisprudence."

"Perhaps not," he conceded.

Picard stared out of the window for a few moments, then he addressed the Doctor. "Anything else?"

"Yes, the child Deanna brought to sick-bay is Merchant's daughter."

Picard raised his brows. "Really! Archive information?"

"Yes," replied the Doctor.

"The other bodies?" asked Data.

"More of the same," said Crusher. She qualified her statement. "At least, so far."

"Sickbay for Dr. Crusher."

The Doctor answered swiftly. "Crusher here."

"Doctor, the Merchant child is now awake."

"Thank you, Campbell," Crusher nodded at Picard. "I'll go and check on my patient."

"Carry on," said the Captain.

"I shall go with you," Worf said, and rose from his seat.

"And I," Troi added. "If you will excuse us. Captain, gentlemen."

As the door closed on them, Picard faced the remaining officers. "We will continue this meeting at a later time." He stood and went back to the bridge.

Data and Riker followed.

Troi and Worf waited for Dr. Crusher to allow them access to Merchant's daughter. The Doctor finally appeared in the doorway of the small isolation ward set to one side of the main sickbay, and gestured them in.

Worf paused momentarily when he caught sight of the girl in the bed. Above her head the instruments made satisfactory beeping noises - as far as he could tell they all read Human stable.

Touching Troi gently on her upper arm, Crusher said, "Her name's Rebecca. Go easy on her - she's been very badly scared. She's lucky to be alive."

"I'll do my best," the Counselor reassured her.

Pouring out comfort and assurances all would be well, Troi approached the bed softly. She pushed her mind out to the child, and encountered a total blank. Nothing. A big fat zero. Troi tried again, and decided to make physical contact as well.

Rebecca Merchant's reaction was totally unexpected. She shrank from the empath as though Troi was plague infested, curling as best she was able into a tight ball. The child presented an impenetrable barrier to her, the small body totally rejecting Troi as thoroughly as her mind.

Troi shook her head in frustration, "She won't let me near her." Then she looked over at Worf who skulked at the edge of the room. "I suppose you want to try?"

"I have nothing to lose," Worf pointed out, and quietly he came closer to the bed. He could sense Troi hovering a slight distance

behind him. It annoyed him, this apparent distrust, but he managed to swallow the emotion. In a low voice, as gently as he could, he said her name. "Rebecca."

There was no response. Rebecca just lay with her eyes squeezed tightly shut, her small mouth in a thin line.

Worf tried again, this time kneeling at the side of the bed. "Rebecca."

Something must have triggered her reaction, because the child uncurled from her foetal position with eyes opened wide, and took in Worf's face at a glance. But rather than the fear he had expected, Rebecca threw her arms around his neck in a stranglehold.

The thin body pressed against Worf's own convulsed violently, and he awkwardly tried to free himself from her grasp.

Troi moved closer, and he turned his head to look slightly up at her. "Counselor," he rasped with embarrassment.

Troi took no notice of the Klingon, just staring intently at Rebecca. "She's a telepath."

Crusher joined them. "Are you sure? No, of course you are. Stupid question."

"Rebecca," Worf said, "release me."

Rebecca's answer was to tighten her hold, and bury her face further into his neck.

Growling, Worf took her into his arms, rose and sat on the edge of the bed. He settled the child on his lap.

Troi sat beside him. "She likes you." Astounded, she watched the child, and tried to gauge the Klingon's response.

"Can she hear me?" And when Troi nodded, Worf sighed. "Will you talk, Rebecca - tell us - " Troi shook her head, indicating he amend the sentence - "me what happened to your parents and the other people?"

The only response was a sharp intake of breath. Rebecca shook her head, resting against Worf again.

He glanced hopefully at the Betazoid. "Do you get anything from her?"

Troi started as he spoke - she had been in deep concentration. "Her shields are too good for me to read her accurately. She can't talk... No, *won't* talk is more accurate."

"Won't?" asked Worf.

"Psychosomatic dumbness is not an unknown reaction to severe stress," stated Crusher from her position at the end of the bed.

"I see." Worf tried to remove one of the skinny arms once more. He had no more luck than before.

"Worf, I'm sorry to say this, but it rather looks as if you'll have to stay here," Crusher observed with a faint smile, "until

she's gone back to sleep."

Worf glared at the two women as they departed leaving him alone with the child.

Perching precariously on the edge of the bed, Worf glanced down at Rebecca. He prepared for a long wait - and he still had no answers.

Riker watched Worf come through the turbolift doors with great interest. As the Klingon came and stood at the tactical console, he asked seriously, "How is Rebecca, Worf?"

Worf lowered his head, presenting his skull ridges to the rest of the bridge crew. The console became fascinating, and he shifted uncomfortably for a moment before raising his eyes to meet Riker's faintly worried blue ones. "She sleeps."

Picard, emerging from his ready room, came and sat in the command chair, which Riker had vacated on his appearance. The Captain looked at his First, and then at Worf. "I thought you were both off-duty?"

"Sir, I think I can speak for Worf as well as myself. We felt in the circumstances - "

Picard waved a hand impatiently. "Admirable, I'm sure. Take the time to rest, both of you. I feel certain you will not have the opportunity later."

Surprised, Riker nodded. He signalled to Worf, who joined him in the turbolift. He eyed the Security Chief. "What did you make of that?"

Worf shrugged his massive shoulders eloquently. "Ten-Forward."

"I'll come with you, Worf," Riker said.

The Klingon regarded Riker steadily. "As you wish, sir."

"Still embarrassed, eh?" Riker regarded Worf with some sympathy.

The turbolift stopped, and the two officers went down the corridor to Ten-Forward. Approaching the doors, they became aware of music and laughter leaching from within, and upon entering the room could not help but notice the crowd of people gathered in a small knot around Ella Maxwell and Tom Jeffries.

The two young Human musicians were singing to a highly appreciative assemblage. Their voices blended in a sweet harmony as they sang a duet - the impromptu concert broke up when Maxwell hit a wrong note. She burst into laughter. "Ouch!"

Around her, people joined in with the laughter, but the atmosphere surrounding the revelry was forced, and, beneath the facade, the true feelings of the crew were literally only a scratch away. News always travelled fast on a starship - it became faster still when it was bad.

"Play your guitar, Ella," someone called. "Something

cheerful."

"Okay," she said. "You only want me to play because it's better than my singing."

Worf and Riker crossed to where Guinan stood watching the antics. Both leaning on the bar, they joined her in contemplation.

"Been going on long?" Riker indicated the crowd.

Guinan directed her dark gaze at the Commander. "Long enough for them to think they're starting to feel better."

Riker stopped watching the musicians, and half-turned to face her. "How do you feel about Pteros?"

Shaking her head, Guinan said, "Not good. I can't quite put my finger on it - but I feel as if I ought to know more about what's going on."

They fell silent once more, and Riker joined Guinan in staring out of the window at the planet slowly turning on its axis.

"How is the child, Worf?" Guinan asked finally.

The Klingon said nothing at first, flicking a glance at her instead. He rumbled eventually, "As well as one could expect."

Riker said, "They're coming over to us."

"Who?"

"The musicians, Worf - they've finished."

Maxwell and Jeffries made their way to the officers. Ella smiled at them both, and propped her guitar against the side of the bar. Jeffries sat on a stool.

Ella fixed her golden gaze on Riker. "The child," she said, "is a telepath, isn't she?"

Startled, Riker asked, "How did you know about that?"

Jeffries and she exchanged guarded looks, then he spoke for the first time. "We know because we're telepathic ourselves." He shook his long blond hair behind him, then ran his fingers through it.

Interested, Worf said, "Is it only you who are - "

Maxwell shook her head. "No. Alex is - and of course, Sundar, and so is T'Vath."

"All of you?"

"Yes," affirmed Maxwell.

"Our abilities are varied," explained Jeffries. "We are musicians who happen to be telepathic. It works quite well for making sure we don't lose our places - but that's about all. We try not to use the ability around 'normals' because some find it threatening."

"Are you aware of our little problem with the child?" Riker

asked.

"What problem is that, Commander?" Ella regarded him carefully.

Riker started to speak, but was forestalled by Jeffries. "She won't talk? Right?"

"Right," he agreed.

"Not uncommon," the young man continued. "I wouldn't myself until I was about three. It was always much easier to pick the information out of people's minds than do all that jawing." At the slightly scandalised looks he was receiving, he added hastily, "But that was before I learned good manners, and acquired the Vulcan mind techniques."

"You're Vulcan trained, then?" the Commander said.

They both nodded.

"Perhaps you could get through to her?" said Worf.

"I don't know - we might." Maxwell was thoughtful. "It might be a good idea if you were to go and see T'Vath. She's the one with the most ability among us, and if anyone could get through, she could."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Riker asked. "Lead on."

Stopping outside the cabin assigned to Nelson, Riker buzzed at the door. After a few moments of waiting, the doors slid open to reveal the musician. He greeted them cordially, and invited the group in.

Once inside, Nelson turned to Riker. "How may I help you, Commander?"

"Well," Riker began, "I believe you and your company are all telepathic to a greater or lesser degree. Am I correct?"

Nelson nodded briefly. "And you feel you might have a use for us in your present situation?"

"No, Alex," butted in Maxwell, "just T'Vath. You know she's got the best training and ability."

"Indeed," agreed Nelson. "I do. Perhaps if the Commander would ask my wife herself?"

A slender woman joined them from the bedroom, her delicately pointed ears proclaiming her identity. Inclining her head very slightly, T'Vath regarded Riker with cool black eyes. "Commander?"

Riker smiled, "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am." He bowed politely. "I have a request to make of you."

T'Vath spoke quietly, "Continue, please."

"As you are aware, we have a problem concerning the planet we are at present orbiting." Riker paused briefly, wondering how much he should say of the situation, then continued, "At any rate, a survivor - a child - is present in sick-bay, and we need to obtain

information from her. The problem is she won't allow anybody close to her except Worf here, and she won't talk either." He regarded the Vulcan woman steadily. "We do know she's telepathic, and Miss Maxwell suggested you might be able to help."

"I see," T'Vath said. She considered the request for the space of a heartbeat, then answered, "Very well. I shall do what I can."

Riker inclined his head. "We're very grateful."

"Do not be grateful, Commander," T'Vath replied coolly, "until I am successful."

She went through the doors of the cabin swiftly, and was followed equally rapidly by the two officers.

David Firth rubbed his hands, and wandered back to the inviting glow of the lights from the small camp which housed the pathology team. The on-site examinations were all going according to plan, and they would soon have all the available forensic evidence to piece together a picture of what happened here.

Firth could not help feeling uncomfortable - he'd swear something was out there, watching. He tried to shake it off; this place made his skin crawl. So he joined a member of the security staff who was standing just at the perimeter of the camp. No-one had wanted to utilise the empty homes - it seemed disrespectful - so empty they remained, the windows reflecting the movements of life whilst they were bereft of their own.

Firth nodded a greeting to Ensign Yates. He stared out into the night, saying, "Does this place give you the creeps?"

"Yeah," the woman agreed. "I've never felt like this before." She shivered. "How long before you've finished here?"

"Tomorrow should see us all done." He paused. "At least, I hope so."

"You've accounted for all the colonists?"

Firth made a slight gesture with his head, a negative. "Not yet, Sue." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the site behind them. "We're making inroads, but Dawes is holding out for more."

"You've been over the area with a fine comb already," she said. "How much more can she want?"

"Molecules," replied Firth. He was serious.

"Hell!" she exclaimed in sympathy.

Falling silent again, they continued their vigil, both feeling heartened by the presence of the other. They would not have been quite so reassured if they had known their crawling skins were giving good advice. IT watched from overhanging shadows amongst the buildings.

IT moved a little nearer to this new food source, and sent a tiny tendril of awareness to the beings who stood before IT. The

mind of one of them was mostly concerned with keeping a 'look-out' - this IT recognised as a female. IT's mind delicately touched the other. A male. Moving still closer, IT tasted again to be certain.

IT slunk low to the ground, and shifted to hide its bulk, sending as it did the block to their minds. Something of interest stopped the hunt - a metal object in the sky, full of food, and - IT became excited - a way of getting to more! IT would never hunger again. No need to kill these - IT would go back with them, onto their ship. IT could see how to do it now - so simple. So easy.

Firth and the woman glanced around with increasing nervousness as the block was withdrawn from their minds. *IT moved deeper into cover, and sent calmness to ease the questing terror percolating from their unguarded minds.*

"I swear something is out there, Sue," Firth was insistent. "Could you see anything?"

Yates stared at Firth. "I - I don't know, Dave. Christ, I - " she swallowed - "I'm going to report to Lt. Worf."

"What the hell are you going to say to him?" asked Firth. "He's gonna want more than you telling him you've had a bad feeling."

She shrugged. "I'd rather get my ears chewed off for being over diligent, than for neglect."

"Okay, 's'your funeral."

Yates glared at him, and touched her communicator. "Yates to Lt. Worf."

Worf's voice came a second later. "Ensign?"

"Sir," she began, "I know this won't make much sense, but something really weird just happened." There was a not very encouraging silence, so she carried on quickly to fill it. "I seem to have lost some time somewhere, sir - like I've had a blackout or something. No," she amended, "more like an absence."

"How much time have you lost?"

Firth mouthed at Yates, who nodded and verified his words with a glance at her chrono. "Approximately 1.5 minutes."

"Indeed." Then Worf said, "Has anyone else experienced something similar?"

Yates explained about the presence of Firth, " - but I don't know about anybody else." She stopped, then blurted, "There's something else - "

"Continue, Mr. Yates."

"I - I mean we thought we were being watched." There, she had said it - no going back now.

"Watched?" rumbled Worf's deep voice. "Have you attempted to look for what you thought was observing you?"

"Not yet, sir. Should I?" Yates inquired.

Ignoring her immediate question, Worf asked, "Tricorder readings?"

Yates thought, *Oh shit!*; out loud she said, "No, sir."

Over the link they could both hear Worf growling an obscenity. He then addressed her. "I suggest, Ensign, you take some readings before whatever caused the anomaly departs without leaving a trace. You may report to me, *personally*, after you have done this." There was a slight gap, as he consulted with someone. "Take Peterson and Mendoza with you. Worf out."

"Aye, sir."

Firth looked at Yates with sympathy. "Personally?"

Yates just shrugged. "I deserve it. C'mon, I'd better crack on - or he'll have my arse in a sling."

From a distance, IT continued to contemplate the prey, and sensing from the female something was about to happen which might prove compromising, moved away.

Riker watched Worf as he closed the communication with the security officer - he would go so far as to say the Klingon was not very happy. Clearing his throat, he said, "Shall we continue?"

Worf glanced briefly at the Commander, and nodded.

With the Vulcan woman between them, they made their way to the nearest turbolift and got into it.

"Sickbay," requested Riker.

They were all quiet and exited rapidly when the lift drew to a halt.

As they entered sickbay, Dr. Crusher came up to them, and regarded T'Vath with interest. "Are you going to introduce me, Commander?"

Riker made the introductions as brief as possible, "Dr. Crusher, this is T'Vath, Alexander Nelson's wife. T'Vath, Dr. Crusher, our Chief Medical Officer."

T'Vath raised her hand. "Live long and prosper, Dr. Crusher. I have been brought to see whether it will be possible for me to communicate with the child you have in your care."

"I see," said Crusher. "You know she won't allow anyone close to her except Lt. Worf, don't you?"

T'Vath inclined her head fractionally. "I have been made aware of that," she agreed. "If you would show me your patient, perhaps I may start to make the attempt."

Reluctant to relinquish her authority, Crusher gave a sidelong glance to Riker, and said finally, "Okay, if you'd like to follow me." She led the way to the ward where Rebecca Merchant sat on her bed.

The child watched the adults with open hostility, and it was only when she spotted Worf that she visibly relaxed. Getting down from the bed, Rebecca scooted to where he stood, and ducked behind him, using his bulk to partially conceal herself.

Worf grimaced slightly, but allowed her to grab one of his hands. "Why me?"

Crusher unsuccessfully hid a smile. "Is that rhetorical?"

The Klingon narrowed his eyes at her. "It was not," he stated firmly. It was increasingly difficult to retain his dignity.

T'Vath, who had been observing the interaction between child and Security Officer carefully, spoke. "Lieutenant, would you assist me by turning Rebecca to face me?"

Worf complied by taking Rebecca under the arms and pulling her in front of him. Gently, he turned her face towards the Vulcan, although Rebecca tried hard to resist the pressure of his fingers.

T'Vath approached slowly, and extended her hand to find the contact points on the child's face. Alarm could be seen to spread over Rebecca, and she struggled with Worf. Behind, Crusher and Riker could almost taste her fear; it was nearly tangible, and they held their breath.

As the Vulcan woman came closer, Rebecca closed her eyes and seemed to retreat into the near catatonia she had been in when found. T'Vath gave an involuntary gasp, and she was pushed firmly away by an unseen force.

Riker got to her first. "Are you all right?"

Staring with open amazement at Rebecca, T'Vath did not speak for a moment, and she shook her head at Riker's offer of assistance to rise, continuing to watch the child with ill-concealed curiosity. "Remarkable," she breathed finally, and raised one elegant brow. Seeing the Humans and the Klingon were all waiting expectantly, she addressed them. "Rebecca is definitely telepathic - " she stopped to see their reactions - "which you are already aware of. It seems she is also telekinetic."

"But why," Worf grated, "does she cling to me?"

"Because she recognizes you as a protector."

"A protector?" Worf repeated. The girl responded to this by nodding her head, and then turned away hiding her face against Worf's hip. "From what?"

T'Vath put her hands behind her back. "Unless Rebecca will allow me to... "

The subject of the conversation gripped Worf and he said in long-suffering tones, "I don't think she will allow it."

"Damn," said Riker. "Just how strong a telepath is she, ma'am?"

The woman turned her attention to the Commander, and included Crusher in her clear dark gaze. "I am unable to give an estimate as I am primarily a musician, and therefore my own abilities are

somewhat limited. However, telekinesis in Humans is sufficiently rare so as to indicate an ability which may well exceed some of the best Vulcan Healers."

"That good?" said Riker, impressed.

"Indeed."

Crusher was very thoughtful. She said, "Thank you for your help, T'Vath. Worf, put Rebecca back to bed, and join me and the Commander when you've finished."

They went through the doors, and Crusher leaned against one of the diagnostic tables, which immediately set it to beeping madly.

T'Vath said, "If you no longer require me - "

"Thank you, ma'am," Riker bowed slightly. "Do you require any assistance in getting back to your quarters?"

"Thank you, but no," she replied, and swept out of sickbay, her robes creating a small eddy of current as she went by them.

The beeping had stopped, and Riker turned to face the Doctor. They were joined shortly by Worf, who was grinding his teeth. "Well?" he asked.

"A protector, huh?" Riker grinned, a fleeting expression which became displaced by a more serious mien. "This is something we need to inform the Captain about."

"Agreed," rumbled Worf.

"Riker to Picard."

"Yes, what is it, Number One?" Picard sounded faintly surprised. "I thought I'd told you to relax?"

"We were, sir, but something important came up," answered Riker. "I think you'll be interested to hear our information."

"Very well. Data and I will meet you in the observation lounge in five minutes."

On Pteros, Yates, Peterson and Mendoza were reaching the conclusion they were wasting their time trying to find whatever it was. They had returned to the camp with no new information, and were on the brink of reporting their apparent failure to Worf.

Yates said, "He's not going to like it."

Mendoza snorted sarcastically. "Just a wild shot in the dark, is it?"

Yates refused to reply, and satisfied herself by ignoring him.

They had spent the last hour and a half going over the immediate area with their tricorders, and had even gone further than was necessary by checking beyond the confines of the camp and empty village.

This attention to duty was wasted as what they were seeking was always one step in front of them. *Even as they were speaking, IT regarded them with interest. Not understanding the words, the implications and sensations from the mind behind them prompted IT to move closer to the female prey animal - it would not do to become separated from her now. IT waited patiently - it did that well.*

Yates reluctantly tapped her badge. "Lt. Worf, Ensign Yates reporting."

His voice came over the link. "You have concluded the search."

It was a statement, and Yates replied stiffly. "Yes, sir."

"In that case, Ensign, report to me in my Command Post. Worf out."

"Aye, sir." She spoke again; inexplicably her mouth formed words she had no reason to say other than they had been put there in her mind by the beast, "Transporter, two to beam up."

IT made a swift pounce, sending the mind-block to blind and disable its victim and the others with her, and landed squarely beside the unaware Yates as the transporter beam took her back to the Enterprise.

As she materialised, the crewmember at the controls blanked out as well, and was spared the sight of Ensign Yates becoming IT's latest victim.

The beast opened cavernous jaws, and severed her head neatly from her neck. IT caught the blood as it fountained from the torn carotid artery, the body's life-giving fluid pulsing out in time with the dead woman's heartbeat from a body that did not realize yet it was dead. Then IT fed comfortably on the transporter platform, making sure there were no remains left - not even a shred of uniform to identify what had happened. IT considered the prey at the other end of the room, but something in the male's mind stopped it from taking him too.

The creature put out tendrils of its mind, sending the block which caused it to become near invisible ahead into the corridor beyond the doors. IT moved swiftly. IT needed a lair.

The Enterprise was running synchronously with Pteros, and therefore most of the crew were taking their rest (it was night here as well as on the planet below them). All those on board the Enterprise who had a claim to some psi abilities and were sleeping stirred fretfully as if in the throes of a nightmare. Those with more than a claim sat up or stopped whatever they were doing momentarily, causing their companions to ask what the matter was.

In sickbay, Rebecca Merchant sat bolt upright and started to scream, a long drawn out ululation which caused Beverly Crusher to rush to the side ward with a hypo filled with a sedative.

Worf, who had been sitting in the observation lounge with the Captain and Riker, was on his feet and rushing for the turbolift before Crusher could send for him.

Riker ran after him, and managed to get into the lift just as

the doors began to slide shut, "What the devil, Worf?"

The Klingon snarled, "I was summoned."

"Just like that? The child?"

Worf nodded quickly. "She is in danger."

The turbolift doors opened again, and Worf ran the rest of the way to sickbay leaving Riker to catch him as best he could. Even before the Klingon got there he could hear Rebecca screaming, and he burst into the ward, phaser in hand.

Rebecca struggled free from the harried and aggrieved Dr. Crusher, and ceased screaming when she saw Worf. In a sob, she said, "W - Worf!"

"Well," remarked the Doctor crossly, "whether she can speak or not seems to have been solved."

Worf finished examining the room, and put his phaser away. Crossing at last to Rebecca, he stood looking down at her. "You are in no danger."

Rebecca lifted her face, brown eyes glittering with unshed tears, and sobbed again. "IT." She raised her hands, and Worf took them in his own, which prompted her to become silent once more and to shake.

Wordlessly, Worf glanced at Crusher. Then he managed to say, "It?"

The child nodded once. "Worf," she said quietly, more of a whisper, calmly, as if his name was a balm.

Crusher came close, and put the end of the hypo on Rebecca's arm. It hissed as the sedative went under her skin. The reaction to the drug was almost immediate and she slumped into an inert scrap of underfleshed bones, Worf laying her back down on the bed.

When they emerged from the room into the main sickbay, Riker said, "Any ideas?"

"It?" Worf repeated again.

Riker looked puzzled, and turned to Picard who had joined them. "It."

Picard said, "How is Rebecca, Doctor?"

Crusher shrugged. "Take a look, Captain."

Picard poked his head around the edge of the door and watched the child for a few moments. Even in her drugged sleep the girl was still not relaxed; she lay on her back with her head turning from side to side, her eyelids a-quiver as if in dream. He turned round. "The sedative does not appear to have moderated her brain activity."

"No," agreed Crusher, "it has not. I'm at a loss to understand why." She pointed at the diagnostic panels above Rebecca's fitful head. "As you can see, the indications are that she is operating her telepathic abilities. Against what, though?"

Riker suggested quietly, "Whatever 'it' is."

"Undoubtedly," replied Picard. "We need to find out what 'it' might be."

"Sir, Commander Riker was present when I received a communique from Ensign Yates regarding a - " Worf's voice dropped with irritation - "'feeling' she had had about being watched. She should be available for questioning."

Picard nodded. "Excellent."

The Klingon tapped his combadge. "Ensign Yates, report to sickbay."

They waited. Nothing happened - there was no reply. Worf shared a look with his commanding officers; such a breach of discipline within Security had never happened before. He tried again with the same results.

Worf struck the insignia more forcefully - as if the blow would make it work more efficiently - and barked, "Worf to Mendoza."

Seconds later, a startled voice replied. "Sir?"

Not one to waste words, the Chief of Security snapped, "Where is Yates?"

All the people in sickbay could hear the man's bewilderment when he spoke again. "With you, sir. She beamed aboard - " a slight pause - "thirty minutes ago. Transporter room five."

Riker stared at the Captain. "And the time the kid started to scream was... "

"Five minutes ago," Worf finished. "Thank you, Mendoza. Worf out." He put a hand on his phaser - it felt reassuring. "It?"

Riker touched his own insignia. "Transporter room five. Has the transporter been used recently - within the last forty minutes?"

A male voice answered promptly. "Aye, sir."

"Can you find out who?"

After a slight wait, the disembodied voice replied in puzzled tones. "Ensign Yates, sir." The man seemed to be trying to find words. "I've found some anomalous readings - something seems to have come with her. Sir, I can't remember her coming aboard."

"That settles that," Picard said grimly. "There's something aboard my ship - and I want to know what."

Troi woke in a cold sweat. She sat up and hugged her knees, desperately seeking to calm her mind. Shivering with reaction, she cocked her head in an attitude of listening, though she was not sure what for.

Heart beating like a drum, Troi swung her legs over the edge of the bed, and set her feet on the floor. "Computer, lights."

Still shivering, she blinked as the illumination increased to daytime brightness. Her room looked exactly the same as it had before she had gone to bed. *This is ridiculous, she thought. Am I a child to be peering under my bed?*

Taking a deep breath, Troi rose and padded softly to a drawer, and removed a set of clean clothing. The Counselor dressed, and went into the living area where she retrieved a hot drink from the food slot.

Warming her hands around the cup, Troi sat on the sofa set against one wall. Tucking her legs under her, she gazed out of the window at the stars. They were brilliant and beautiful in the dark vacuum of space, but even their glory dimmed beside the sight of Pteros's face. The planet hung beside the Enterprise, a blue and white gem studded with emerald and ochre. *What could have happened?* she thought, and shuddered again. *What did I dream that so frightened me?*

Troi tried hard to shake the feeling of impending doom she had, and decided, for better or worse, she had to speak to Crusher. Perhaps a sleeping pill would do the trick?

Rising from the couch, Troi found her boots, slipped them onto her feet then headed for the door. It swished open the way it always did, but tonight the noise seemed suddenly sinister, and she managed to resist the urge to creep along the edge of the wall with her back firmly against it. *Not Dr. Crusher, she thought. I must see the Captain.*

Troi did not think she had ever been so relieved to see a turbolift, and she bolted into the well lit interior. A little loudly she demanded, "Bridge." She had not realized she was holding her breath until she released it in a gush once the doors closed securely on her.

The turbolift set off smoothly, and stopped, opening its doors, allowing her to make a hasty retreat.

As she stepped out onto the ramp, she immediately sensed all was not well. There was an ensign in the command chair she did not recognise, and the other senior staff were conspicuous by their absence. Not that that would normally be so unusual for the graveyard shift. Normally.

Troi made her way across the bridge, past the tactical console and science stations, and entered the observation lounge. She looked around the table at the faces turning to face her as she entered. She smiled unconvincingly. "Couldn't sleep," she said, by way of an explanation.

Picard's expression was bland, as was Riker's. Worf and Data were unreadable.

"I was just about to page you, Deanna," the Captain said. "You couldn't have arrived at a more opportune moment."

Troi blinked, and took a seat at the table. "Why, sir?"

Riker swivelled his chair to look at Picard, who gestured for the First Officer to continue. "Counselor, do you have any... Do you sense anything abnormal about the Enterprise?"

"Well... I'm not certain... but - " Troi frowned - "can you hear it, Commander? ...The noise - it's here on the ship."

The others assumed an attitude of listening, all except for Data, and looked back at Troi.

"Yes," murmured Picard, "I hear it. Do you, Data?"

Data cocked his head. "No, sir. I am impervious to all forms of telepathy, and this does not seem to be an exception."

Riker ran his hands over his eyes wearily. "Deanna, what brought you here - now, at this time?"

Troi closed her eyes. "A nightmare."

Worf was incredulous. "A *dream*?"

"It was more than a dream, Lieutenant." Troi sounded slightly terse. "It was more of a premonition - like something bad is going to happen."

"A 'feeling'?" the Klingon asked.

Troi met Worf's eyes slightly suspiciously, but could see he asked sincerely. "Yes, a 'feeling'."

Worf growled from low in his chest. "Perhaps I should have taken more notice of Yates' feeling."

"You weren't to know, Worf, that it was important," Riker said quietly. "You have to run your department on certainties."

Mollified, the Klingon relaxed slightly. Turning to Troi again, he asked, "Anything else?"

Picard sat forward in his chair, fixing his steady gaze on her. "Anything, Counselor. The smallest bit of information may be a piece of the puzzle."

Troi closed her eyes again, and 'felt' the ship's crew. Opening them, she focused on the faces around her. "There is something on board," Troi whispered. "It hides itself - it knows I know. It - it is an empath too."

Riker leaned closer to the obviously shaken woman. "It's an empath?"

Mutely, Troi nodded her head. Swallowing, she said, "Not like me - a full empath, a broadcaster. Something that can sense emotions in others and control them - something that is using them now. Can't you feel it? There is fear permeating the ship like a fog." Troi dropped her head onto her chest, hunching her shoulders. "There's something else. It's hunting - it's on the kill. Now I know what woke me."

"Where?" Data asked.

Troi shook her head. "I can't tell," she admitted reluctantly.

Data waited for her to speak again, and, when Troi did not, he said, "Counselor, in your opinion, what might this creature be hunting?"

Bleak, dark eyes stared from a white face. "Me," she said hoarsely.

Picard stood, and moved back out onto the bridge, followed closely by his officers. "Data," he ordered, "I want you to scan the entire ship, level by level, until you find a reading to match the one left in the transporter." He addressed Worf. "Mr. Worf, when Data has the information - "

Data interrupted, "Sir, I believe the creature is located on deck 18. It is moving rapidly towards - Sir, it has killed."

Worf nodded at Picard, then touched his insignia, "Security alert. Smitherson, collect Able, Roberts and Wadham, and proceed to Deck 18. Phasers on stun." *For now*, he thought.

While the Klingon was occupied with his personnel, Picard turned to Troi and crossed to where she stood at the doors of the observation lounge. She trembled with suppressed reaction, and he asked her gently, "In what manner do you mean - 'me'?"

"I'm sorry, sir. That - that wasn't very accurate." Troi tried to pull her chaotic thoughts into some sort of order. "Not *just* me - other telepaths too. They know it's there - and the creature realizes this."

"Do you get much from this creature?" Picard's voice was urgent.

Troi stared into her Captain's grim, set face. "Please, sir, don't ask me to... "

"I must, Deanna. No matter how frightened you are, we must know."

"Sir." The single word was almost a plea, but Troi complied and tentatively touched the savage, predatory mind questing beneath them. An impression of heat, blood - and the awful, dreadful, consuming hunger driving the beast. Ravening, totally absorbed in its own ego; aware of others only as food. A glimmering, frighteningly different intelligence, and it sensed her immediately. The beast threw emotion at her, and Troi recoiled as though struck. Overcome with nausea and mind-numbing fear, her knees buckling, the Betazoid collapsed onto the floor of the bridge. Dimly, she heard Picard calling for sickbay, and then strong arms supported her weight. Feebly, she whispered, "Bill?"

"It's me, Deanna," his voice reassured her.

Clutching his arm with ferocious fingers, Troi said, "IT comes." Then the soft darkness of unconsciousness held out comforting arms to her, and she gladly moved into them.

Data glanced at his console. "Captain, it is indeed coming to the bridge."

"Estimated time of arrival?" barked Worf.

"Get her out of here!" commanded Picard, and Riker picked up the helpless woman, carrying her to the ready room. Leaving her there, he locked the doors, and prayed that would be enough.

Data said, "The creature will be arriving in 22.3 seconds - "

he pointed a finger at the entrance to the gangway - "from there."

Riker stood behind him, and waited for this thing to appear. He found himself afraid - very, very afraid. The emotion grew larger than him, and at last he realized the fear was caused by the android in front of him. Why had he never grasped how terrifying Data was - he must switch him off. Now, his mind screamed. *Do it NOW!* And the Commander reached out unwilling fingers to the very place on the android's body - there, it was done!

As Data slumped over his station, IT came onto the bridge, freezing the bridge crew where they stood, and sniffed at the minds with curiosity. Where was the one it sought? Not here. IT moved about the bridge, stopping at last by Worf. A worthy adversary; perhaps to hunt this would be a challenge.

IT paused by Picard, recognizing this to be the mind controlling the actions of the other prey. Most of these were indispensable, and it could not afford its hunger to cause a mistake. Only the android posed any real threat; it could see IT - the block would have no hold on that one.

IT lingered on the bridge, tasting its helpless captives, one and all held in thrall to the vast and savage mind contained in a predator's efficient body. A born killer, IT slunk eventually from the bridge, muscles rippling under a smooth pelt of polished ebony.

The bridge crew came to simultaneously as IT released them from its hold. Riker started. "Data?"

"Number One, Commander Data - is he all right?"

Riker finished his examination of the android, and nodded once in the Captain's direction. "I think I switched him off, sir." Holding Picard's probing regard, he replied, "I don't think I had much choice - whatever that thing is made me do it."

"Then he is not damaged?" Picard asked.

Riker switched Data on, and the android sat straight in his chair looking somewhat bemused. "Are you okay?" The First Officer put a hand on Data's shoulder.

"I seem to be functioning normally, sir," he replied.

"Excellent," said Picard. "Mr. Worf, ship status?"

Worf stared grimly at his console. "All systems normal, sir."

"Data," Picard said, "do you have any readings on the whereabouts of that creature?"

"It is proceeding to the cargo bays."

"What I want to know," Riker mused, "is why we're still alive? Anybody got a theory to boot about?"

Worf growled, "Sir, it has killed twice on board. Perhaps it is sated."

"Possibly," Picard agreed. "Have your staff reported?"

The Klingon looked embarrassed. "I do not know," he admitted.

At a look from the Captain, Worf made moves to correct the omission, and Picard turned his attention to Riker once more.

"Counselor Troi?"

"Hell, yes," said Riker, and crossed to the ready room to unlock the doors. From within the room he called, "She's fine."

The object of concern emerged from the doorway with Riker solicitously supporting her. Troi smiled weakly in gratitude, allowing him to lead her to her chair.

Once seated, Troi found herself the centre of attention. "You want me to find out what it's doing?" As her Captain affirmed this, Troi sighed unhappily and moved her mind along the periphery of the beast's. This time she made certain she did not trigger the creature's hunting instincts. Astonished, she turned to Picard, "It is sleeping."

From behind them, Worf said, "Then we take our chance - now!"

"Agreed, Mr. Worf," said Picard. "Make it so."

Worf finished debriefing the Security Officers he had sent to Deck 18. He was not pleased with the information. Of the four, only one had managed to catch a glimpse of the opposition, and as it was fleeting, hardly any use to them at all. Further questioning revealed the officer concerned had some psi ability, and Worf reported this more useful finding to the Captain and Counselor Troi.

He and his officers travelled along the corridor to Cargo Bay 3's doors. "Phasers on maximum setting," the Klingon ordered, and on his signal the doors opened and the security team slid into the interior. "Fan out. Able, as you are the one the creature is likely to be interested in because of your abilities, I want you keep an open link. We will start from here. Move."

The security personnel manoeuvred themselves into the search pattern Worf indicated with dispatch, and spread out amongst the containers. The big Klingon switched into an automatic mode, his own instincts for the hunt taking over.

Able crept stealthily along, then ducked behind a receptacle, and tried to swallow the fear in his throat. It was thick in his neck, and the tension translated itself into pain which ran the length of his back. Slowly and carefully he placed one foot in front of the other, trying to make no sound - of no use at all, because the beast was awake and knew they were there.

IT lazily stretched the long powerful limbs which ended in retractile claws, and yawned. Vaulting casually to the top of a container it lay down to await the clumsy animal trying to control its movements. IT toyed with allowing this animal to see IT in all its glory. Gloating, the beast waited; the smell of them was enticing, and the one who could challenge hunted also.

Worf listened, straining every nerve ending, and stopped because he had heard something. In a harsh whisper he demanded, "Wadham?"

No reply.

Moving onwards, Worf was joined by Roberts, who shook her head

when he looked a question at her. Side by side, the one covering the other, they made their way steadily to the point Worf had pinpointed the noise as coming from. They stepped into a pool of rapidly spreading blood which dripped from above them.

As Roberts tilted her head upwards, a steaming pile of viscera fell to land at their feet along with a well chewed upper torso; the ribs poked from torn skin, showing white and red, all the muscle shredded. Only the face was recognizable. Wadham.

Worf seethed with impotent fury, and turned his attention to the Human woman standing next to him. Frozen with horror, Roberts glanced up at him, her face drained of colour, and she swung round to lean her forehead against the side of one of the huge crates. Heaving, Roberts desperately attempted to control the muscular spasms of her stomach. She did not succeed, and vomited messily.

"Finished?" her superior asked.

Shakily, she nodded, and wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her uniform.

"We proceed, then," Worf said, and moved off. "Together," he continued, "we may survive. Able?"

A small voice answered. "Sir?"

"Smitherson?"

"Aye, sir."

Three still alive, Worf thought. "Make your way to me," he ordered. "We will withdraw."

There was a scream not far from him and Roberts just then, and the unmistakeable sound of breaking bones as one of the remaining threesome became the beast's latest victim. Worf shared a look with the woman, and decided in an instant that whatever 'it' was had them seriously disadvantaged. Enraged and frustrated because he had no idea what the creature looked like, the Klingon tightened his grip on his phaser and with Roberts started to move to the exit.

Another scream cut through his nerves like a knife through butter, and Worf spun round to see something from the corner of his eyes leap away out of his direct field of vision. *I will have you*, he directed the savage thought into the cargo bay, then pushed Roberts roughly towards the doors. He stood his ground, a wolf's smile on his mouth.

Rebecca Merchant swung her feet over the edge of her bed, and stood on thin shaky legs. She walked slowly to the doors and looked out into the sickbay. Seeing Dr. Crusher administering to some other patients, and taking advantage of the Doctor's momentary inattention, Rebecca hurried out to the corridor. She had to stop him; this was not the way.

"Sir," Data said urgently. "Three of Lieutenant Worf's personnel have been killed by the creature."

Alarmed, Picard stepped out of his chair and looked over the android's shoulder at the sensor readings. "Worf?"

"His vital signs show he is alive and well." Unnecessarily, or so Picard felt, Data added, "At the moment."

An anxious Commander Riker joined Picard. "I'm going down there - he needs some assistance. Seems to me we've seriously misjudged this thing."

"Agreed, Number One," Picard said, and as his First Officer made a hasty exit to the turbolift, "and take care, Will."

Riker inclined his head, "I'll do my damndest, sir."

A beeping signalled the opening of a communication, and Beverly Crusher's apprehensive voice carried loudly in the nearly empty bridge.

"Jean-Luc," she started, the use of the Captain's given name an indication of great distress, "the Merchant girl is no longer in her room. She's just upped and went." Then the Doctor continued, "It's Worf, isn't it? What in God's name is he up to?"

"Calm yourself, Doctor," Picard tried to placate the raging woman. "If she's gone to Worf, then he will take care of her."

"Captain," interrupted Data, "I believe I have located Rebecca Merchant. She is at present on Deck 30, and is proceeding downwards."

"Thank you, Commander," said Picard. "Did you hear that, Beverly?"

"Yes," replied the Doctor, "and I'm on my way down too."

"Mr. Data, send more security to Cargo Bay 3. We must catch this creature, and retain it securely."

"Aye, sir."

The girl picked up her feet and hurried towards the terrible mind she knew so well - the killer of her parents and indirectly, of her baby brother. Rebecca Merchant feared IT - only a fool would not - and was awed by the sheer power of IT's abilities, but could respect the mind as one of enormous potential.

She could sense Worf waiting with a savage glee, and hurried ever onwards.

IT watched the one at the exit. The sheer savagery of the male's mind delighted and tempted IT to come out of hiding, and to reveal itself to him. But IT decided on restraint and examined the creature with interest. Prey creatures were so much more intriguing when allowed their own thoughts and emotions.

Worf bided his time. He wondered how long this game of nerves would last, and whether he could stand the inaction indefinitely.

Bored at last, IT leapt down from the vantage point it had taken, and padded on silent feet towards the Klingon. Sending fear,

the beast caused Worf to root to the spot, and exposed itself to his gaze. As the Security Chief watched, long, silky lips peeled back from glistening canines, and saliva dripped into a small pool under the massive head.

Rebecca burst through the doors, propelling herself into Worf. IT shook its head in confusion as the sound of tinkling bells became apparent. Loosing the hold it had on the Klingon the beast bounded over the head of its would-be assassin in one massive leap, and set off for another area. Anything to get away from the irritating buzzing which caused the mind-blindness.

Brushing Rebecca aside, Worf endeavoured to go after IT, but stopped when a small cracked voice said, "N - no."

He turned and glowered at her through narrowed eyes. "You choose to speak now?" Then, as he was about to interrogate her further another voice intruded in his awareness, and the sound of pounding feet coming to a halt.

"Worf, are you okay?" Riker asked with concern, and when the Klingon acknowledged he was, relaxed visibly.

Then Worf grunted, and pointed at Rebecca. "She has chosen to speak." Worf regarded the girl for a moment, then turned his attention to the Commander. "I saw it," he stated bluntly.

"L - let you," said Rebecca, so softly that at first neither were sure they had heard her.

Riker and Worf both stared at her, and both frowned almost simultaneously. Worf growled impatiently, "Explain?"

The child just stared at the floor, then sidled nervously towards Worf even though she could feel their eyes boring intently into the top of her head. She shook her head mulishly, setting her thick crop of dark blonde hair in motion. "C - can't."

They were saved from having to say anything further by the appearance of Dr. Crusher, who hurried forward to examine Rebecca. Satisfied she was well, Crusher looked up from her scanner long enough to glare furiously at both men. Mouth tight, she asked, "How many?"

Neither Worf nor Riker pretended they did not understand the question, and the Klingon replied, "Three, Doctor. However, they will not be requiring your services."

"I see." The tone was quiet, but still forceful.

Briskly, Crusher took Rebecca's arm to take her with her back to sickbay, but the girl pulled her arm out of the Doctor's grip. "No!"

"You want to stay with Worf?"

Rebecca nodded, then took one of Worf's large hands in her own. Raising her face up to him, she said, "P - please."

"Commander Riker. Will - are you all right?" Picard sounded worried.

"Yes, sir," responded Riker. "So is Worf. He saw the

creature."

There was silence, and then they heard Data say, "Commander, the creature is heading to Holodeck Four."

Worf snarled, then said, "Is anyone using it?"

There was more silence as the android consulted his instruments. As the seconds ticked by like hours - days even - the waiting grew ever more impatient. "Yes, Worf," Data replied at last. "The musicians, Miss Maxwell and Mr. Jeffries."

Riker slumped against the bulkhead with exhaustion. "Why the hell can't they be in bed like everybody should be?"

"You're not," pointed out Crusher. They had forgotten she was there.

"No," he agreed. "But I wish to God I was, and out of this damn nightmare." Riker cursed impressively to vent his spleen, earning a frown from the Doctor. Ignoring her, he said, "C'mon, Worf." Then he set off at a steady trot, the Klingon and child behind him, and the security men who had arrived too late to help their colleagues.

More prey. IT could not believe how fortunate it was. Through the doors of the Holodeck could be sensed the emanations of the truly interesting members of the species - telepaths!

IT moved into the interior of the Holodeck, expecting the animals to realize it had entered their domain, but their attention remained focused on something else. Sniffing curiously at them and their minds, IT slunk across the Holodeck floor, and hid to observe the prey better.

Ella Maxwell swept the bow across her violin, her eyes closed in concentration, and Jeffries leaned on a chair listening intently to the music. She plucked expertly at the strings, causing the instrument to sing the notes out sweetly. Then he joined her, and together the whole of the piece was awe-inspiring in its grandeur. The holographic orchestra behind them gave depth and poignancy, the music surging to lift them both on a crest of emotionalism. They became one with themselves, oblivious to any exterior force.

Rebecca gasped, and gained Worf's attention. "What?" he demanded.

Into his mind came the vision of IT waiting as it had in the cargo bay. "Commander, the creature is about to begin the hunt again."

Riker turned his head to glance over his shoulder, "The musicians, right?"

"Yes," said Worf. He did not feel the need to add any more - they were doing the best they could.

"No, Tom," Maxwell said firmly. "Not like that - listen." She tapped her bow in time against her thigh, and nodded at him. "D'you see now?"

Jeffries closed his eyes, and hummed the refrain. "Yes, I've got it." He sighed, "Ella, let's call it a night. I've heard about

devotion to duty, but this is ridiculous."

Maxwell smiled at him, and ran her hand through her black curls. "Yeah, okay. First thing tomorrow, Tom, or we'll never get it right."

"Fine," Jeffries said, and yawned with jaw-cracking intensity. He started to put away his music; that was when he noticed something out of the ordinary.

Tapping Maxwell, he whispered, "Ella, there's something or somebody in here with us."

Maxwell frowned at him, her eyes becoming a blank as she felt the rabid touch of the beast in her mind. "Tom?"

"I know," he said. "I think we should get out of here quick - run, Ella! RUN! EXIT!!!"

Jeffries pushed the young woman in front of him, and using all of his strength propelled her through the open doors out to the corridor. They shut behind her with a death knell, and Maxwell dropped her violin to spin violently against them, beating her fists ineffectually on their face.

As the small contingent of personnel arrived, Worf broke from the pack to take the young Human and pass her to the Commander. He could not be certain, but he thought the sounds of the beast feeding were discernable through the Holodeck doors; Worf checked they were tightly sealed so the beast could not escape. He deployed some of his men at the entrance.

As the Klingon shoved Maxwell to him, Riker grabbed the hysterical young woman, and she turned on him, trying to get back to the doors. Pounding on the First Officer's chest, Maxwell screeched, "Tom is still in there! GET HIM OUT!!!"

Riker held the flailing arms, and forced Ella to face him. Tears ran unheeded to drip onto the front of her dress, staining it with wet splotches. Voice wavering, she said, "Tom is in there with something - please, Commander, help him."

"Madam," rumbled Worf, "Jeffries is beyond any help we could offer now."

Maxwell screamed at the Klingon, "You're lying - GET HIM OUT!!!" And she struggled in a vain attempt to break Riker's hold.

Riker shook her none too gently, and shouted at her to try to keep the hysteria at bay, "He's dead, Ella. Use that telepathy of yours if you don't believe me or Worf. You know I'm right." Each word he punctuated with a little shake until she relaxed like a ragdoll, limp and unprotesting.

"Yes," she acquiesced, "I know it." The woman raised her face, golden eyes swollen. "We were going to be married."

Riker cursed in his head, then turning to Worf, said, "You've sealed the Holodeck? Let's see if we can keep it there."

Rebecca stopped them all in their tracks when she said the first long statement they had ever heard her utter. "IT... IT w - will g - get... out."

"How do you know, Rebecca?" Riker turned his attention to the child, but she retreated into silence once more and edged towards Worf. Touching his insignia, he said, "Captain, we have the creature contained in Holodeck Four - " and added - "for the moment."

"Number One, a conference in five minutes."

"Aye, sir," he replied. "Worf, bring the kid."

Supporting Ella Maxwell, Riker moved off down the corridor. Worf followed - after detailing the security officers - with Rebecca Merchant.

The Commander was troubled, and for once in his life, he hadn't got a clue how to handle a losing hand.

Captain's Log, Stardate 48863.2.: There is a predator aboard the Enterprise. Casualties, at present, number five: four security officers, and, regretfully, Mr. Tom Jeffries.

Mr. Nelson has been advised of his death and the circumstances surrounding it. I can see no use in maintaining silence concerning the existence of the creature - the crew should be aware of the danger we face. That includes all civilians.

Miss Maxwell has been placed in sickbay to be treated for shock.

As to how I handle this emergency - I am open to *any* suggestions.

The doors to the ready room opened, and from where he sat Picard saw a pair of feet waiting patiently.

Riker's voice filled the emptiness. "We're ready for you, sir."

Raising his head, Picard acknowledged him. "On my way, Number One." Getting to his feet, the Captain stepped from behind the desk, switching off the computer as he went. "After you, Commander."

They marched through the doors, crossing the bridge to the observation lounge. It was a graveyard. No-one spoke, everybody turning expectantly as they entered.

Drily, Picard noted the differing expressions of his staff, and thought, *Another rabbit out of yet another hat*. He took a seat at the head of the table.

The Captain did not at first notice the child as she stood to one side of Worf trying to make herself as unobtrusive as possible, and he stared with open amazement at the apparition when he finally did.

Coolly, he asked, "Mr. Worf, what is this child doing here?"

Worf detached Rebecca's hand from his own and started to respond to the question at the same time as Riker, but was unable to complete his sentence. He closed his mouth and allowed Riker to speak.

"On my orders, Captain," said the First Officer.

"I see. Why?"

Worf replied quickly, keeping it short. "She refuses to leave my side, and she has information about the creature, sir, which could prove useful."

"She has told you something important?"

"Not yet," admitted Worf slowly.

"Then return her to sickbay. This is no place for a child." The Captain's voice was firm and brooked no argument, and the Security Officer rose to obey.

A strange noise issued from the throat of Rebecca; she touched the Klingon, gaining his attention, and frantically shook her head. Worf glanced at her, then addressed the Captain, "Sir... "

"No excuses, Lieutenant."

Worf bowed his head, "Very good, sir."

At this, the girl looked around the table at the assembled adults, then moved firmly into Picard's direct line of sight. "N - no."

Surprised, Picard cocked an eyebrow and regarded Rebecca thoughtfully. "No?" he repeated ominously.

Opening and closing her mouth so she resembled a gaping fish, Rebecca tried desperately to speak. She appealed to Worf with her eyes, but could see there would be little assistance from that quarter. She might have appointed him as her guardian, but he would not be her spokesman also.

They all waited, and it burst out of her at last. "I - IT." Trembling, she drooped against the table, and repeated in low tones, "IT."

Before she collapsed, Worf very gently put his hand on her shoulder and pulled her into the chair next to him. Unaccustomed to making any display of emotion - including approval - he awkwardly squeezed her shoulder. Rebecca shivered and drooped her head like a broken flower onto his hand, then rested her cheek against his knuckles.

A frustrated Riker got to his feet, and paced around the room. "Dammit! What's she trying to tell us? Deanna, can you shed any light?"

Troi looked over at him, and frowned. "Bill, I haven't got the abilities to talk to a telepath directly - unless they wish it. Rebecca, as has been demonstrated before, does *not* wish it. I can't get past her shields, and all I can say categorically is that she's very badly frightened." She sighed. "But then, we all are."

"Worf?" he asked, standing still just long enough to throw the question at the Klingon.

"Nor I," said Worf reluctantly. "Sometimes I receive impressions from her, but I do not have any psi talent at all. I believe my interaction with Rebecca on that level to be limited to if she is in danger."

"Damn," muttered Picard. A little louder he added, "So, we've reached an impasse it seems."

"Would she 'talk' to Mr. Nelson's wife? She has already been introduced to T'Vath," suggested Data.

"We have nothing to loose by trying, Commander." Picard looked at the girl, and he leaned forward towards her in an instinctive desire to persuade her more easily. "You do want to help, don't you, Rebecca?" At the child's hesitant nod, he carried on, "Will you allow T'Vath to talk to you this time?"

Rebecca's face became closed and set, and the Counselor, seeing the way her thoughts were going to take, tried to wheedle her. "Please, Rebecca, it is very important. I promise no-one will do anything you don't like."

Worf growled, and directed a scowl at the child. To Troi, he said, "Enough mollycoddling." Then to the girl, "Rebecca, you will allow T'Vath to speak with you." In a softer tone he added, "I wish it."

Staring at her bare feet, Rebecca shifted uncomfortably and sat on them. Then lifting her face, she gazed at Worf from under the thick fringe of hair in front of her eyes.

Unperturbed by her expression the Security Officer matched her glare for glare, then into his mind came a hesitant affirmative - mixed with terror, it was true - but for all that, 'Yes'.

"Good," Worf approved vocally. And addressing the Captain, said, "She will allow T'Vath to meld with her now."

Picard sighed with relief. "Excellent. Lieutenant, if you will escort T'Vath - " The Captain trailed off at the sight of his Chief of Security being grabbed by a Human child who was determined not to let him out of her reach.

Managing to ignore Worf's obvious discomfort at being made a spectacle, he regained his train of thought with some small effort and went on, "Perhaps it might be better for us to go to T'Vath - rather than Rebecca becoming separated from you."

"Agreed," said a thoroughly disgruntled Klingon.

Unable to drag his eyes away from the sight of Worf being hugged, Picard addressed Data, "Commander, you have the bridge."

"Very good, sir," responded the android.

They all followed Picard as he left the observation lounge, Data taking the command chair as they crammed onto the turbolift.

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In Holodeck Four, IT chewed on a femur, the flesh long since rasped away.

Outside the exit, Worf's men stood on guard; they were certain they had the beast secure - an erroneous assumption.

Contemplating the minds outside of the room IT at present occupied, the beast 'saw' immediately how to escape. Utilizing that knowledge with efficiency, and stepping out from the Holodeck into the corridor IT killed twice more. Neither security officer had warning of their imminent disposal, and as they died there was not enough time for the surprise of their deaths to shadow their faces. Tasting each, but not hungry enough to make a start on the meat, IT decided to return and hide the food later. Then IT slunk off, the great hungry mind searching ahead for more prey.

Their deaths were unnoticed by the ship and its computer, and therefore went unreported.

"What does the creature look like, Worf?" asked Riker curiously.

The Klingon considered the appearance of the beast. Succinctly he replied, "Ugly."

"Big?"

"Very."

"Lots of teeth?"

"Was it a mammal, Worf?" asked Troi.

As the two questions came close together, the Klingon answered them both at the same time and looked from the Counselor to Riker as he did so. "I didn't get close enough to check."

"You're slipping, Worf," Riker observed.

Stiffly, he replied, "I was... distracted."

Picard listened with half an ear to the conversation, walking briskly down the corridor towards the quarters of the musicians. Nelson had been more than pleased to offer whatever assistance he could; Picard hoped the situation they found themselves in was recoverable. The beast seemed a formidable predator.

"How d'you mean," Riker persisted, "ugly?"

"It was not aesthetically pleasing. It was mostly mouth - and teeth. Very large, sharp teeth. As to whether it was mammalian - " Worf shrugged dismissively - "it had a hairy skin. But I'm no zoologist - I am a warrior."

"And a protector of - " Riker stopped talking as they reached their destination. He heard Worf growling in irritation at the untimely reminder of Rebecca's role for him - he could not resist the temptation - and finished the sentence quickly - "fair maidens."

Worf gave him a filthy look, and set the girl on her feet. Rebecca retained a tight hold of his hand.

Nelson opened the door. "Welcome."

Ushering them in, the musician offered them a seat. Picard sat, then meshed his fingers together and without further preamble said, "Your wife is willing to meld with Rebecca?"

Inclining his head fractionally, Nelson said, "Yes."

At that moment, T'Vath entered the cabin she shared with her husband; the other Vulcan in the company was with her. "Sundar is here to observe," she stated by way of an explanation.

"Of course." Picard glanced briefly at Worf, who obeyed the unspoken command and guided Rebecca to T'Vath. Troi and Riker looked on with interest.

Rebecca sat, a small figure in an over-large chair, and huddled into the far corner. She watched the Vulcan woman like a cornered rat, and reluctantly submitted to a process she did not want.

IT could smell them - the telepaths were on this level, and a bonus was the stunted empath. The other hunter was present. Savage incoherent joy seized the beast, and it moved swiftly towards this prey, intent on removing this particular problem in one fell swoop.

As IT approached the cabin, the low noise started to permeate its great, thick skull. And something else too - a searcher.

Taking fright, IT decided to take cover in the lair it had found, and made its way back to Holodeck Four, giving out fear and confusion wherever it went. In this case what it broadcast belonged to the beast in full measure, and was not manufactured to 'blind' the prey. IT had to hide - soon - or be found.

Unaware of the respite they had been given, T'Vath went ahead with the meld in the Nelson's quarters, and the Enterprise and the lucky few of her crew who could make no claims to a mental talent slept on in restless oblivion.

Hours passed and as the cold grey light of another dawn came to Pteros, the ship personnel woke and started to go about the business of living. *IT woke also, and sent out ripples of its mind delicately into the void beyond the ship. Not sensing what it had before, IT became alert - hunger gripped again, sending IT to hunt once more.*

T'Vath broke the meld with Rebecca. Slim fingers trembling, the Vulcan woman accepted her husband's assistance to move to another chair. Sundar gave her a steaming cup of herbal tea, and she slipped her hands around the exterior of the cup with gratitude. T'Vath took a long sip of the fluid before she raised her head to observe the others in their quarters. She started to think deeply, a slight frown creasing her otherwise smooth forehead.

Worf crouched down to look at the Human child who was now sleeping, white eyelids patterned with the stark blue of veins; he could track the trace of tears drying on her cheeks. Satisfied she

was all right, he rose and stepped towards the Captain who was talking quietly with Riker and Nelson. Troi sat opposite them, her head tilted backwards, eyes closed.

Eventually, Picard turned his regard to T'Vath. "Lady, what can you tell us?"

T'Vath considered the question. "Tell you? What did you want to know, Captain? The child has seen the nature of the beast, but that is of no use to you because it blinds those it hunts."

"I have seen it," Worf replied to her statement.

"Agreed," said T'Vath. "But Lieutenant, it *wished* you to see it. Rebecca believes that if you had not been disturbed by her intervention, it would have claimed you as its next victim."

Troi, who had been listening, sat up. "It is only visible to those with some psi abilities?"

"Yes," said T'Vath. "Or your android officer, Commander Data."

Riker fingered his beard thoughtfully, "How about this 'mind-noise' we've had on board since the creature arrived?"

T'Vath indicated the sleeping child, "She makes the sound - " the Vulcan looked at Rebecca - "to confuse the beast, and to disturb it."

Picard took a deep breath, then sighed, "So, she confuses the creature with her own telepathy, and she knows what it looks like. I don't see how this is going to help us at all." He was profoundly disappointed. Obviously, the solution to getting the creature off his ship must lie elsewhere. The trouble was finding it. To try to comfort his racing mind, the Captain paced back and forward before sitting again. He crossed his legs, and realized he had attracted the attention of those present.

"Nor I," growled Worf when the Captain finally settled. He looked out of the window at the view, and folded his arms against his chest.

"There has to be a way, Captain," Riker said. "Perhaps if we allowed Data - "

"No good," responded Picard, "because if you recall, Number One, the beast made you switch him off. If it can do that to you, who are a close friend of Data's, then it can certainly make any other crewperson who happens along do the same."

Riker rubbed his eyes, then offered, "If Rebecca was to - "

"No." The word grated from Worf.

T'Vath shook her head in agreement with the Klingon. "The child is already traumatised by the deaths of the colony. It is something she felt keenly as a telepath. To ask too much of her now will only ensure she becomes stunted as an adult."

Picard rose and paced the living area again; it was an indication of his internal distress. Stopping, he looked at the people in the room, "Present me with some more options, and I shall consider them. Until then, Rebecca is the only hope we have of

getting this thing off the Enterprise."

"Captain." Data's voice interrupted the discussion. "the creature has started to move from Holodeck Four. It has killed again."

"My officers?" Worf asked, already knowing the answer to his question.

"Yes, Lieutenant," affirmed the android.

Worf turned to Captain Picard. "Sir, I must - "

Rebecca chose that moment to wake. "W - Worf? N - no!" Fear filled her face lividly, and she tumbled off the chair to reach him before he could go out the door.

Riker eyed the child thoughtfully, "Lady T'Vath, why is Rebecca so keen on Worf?"

"She sees him as a protector," the woman stated simply.

Picard shared a look with his First. "More than that, though, isn't it?"

T'Vath nodded in slow agreement. "Indeed."

Troi became interested in the turn the conversation had taken. "Do you think she might be using some of Worf's own abilities and incorporating them into her own?"

Everybody in the room regarded the child with speculation. Rebecca hid her face against Worf's side, and he rested a hand on her head. "I must go," he insisted. "My duty to the ship as Chief of Security - "

"Yes, Worf," said Picard, "I know." Tapping his communicator, Picard continued, "Mr. Data, issue a general red alert - I want no-one to leave their quarters. Not even to work - all doors are to be locked. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," responded the android.

The ship reverberated then to the sound of the red alert, and as they listened to it they were disturbed by Guinan.

"Captain," came her voice, "do you think you and your senior staff, Mr. Nelson, and his colleagues could join me? I think I might have a possible solution to our little problem."

Picard listened hopefully. "Guinan, if you have any ideas how to solve this dilemma, then I can assure you we look forward to hearing your plan."

"Well," she replied, "it's only an idea."

"Any port in a storm," remarked Riker.

"I'll be waiting," the enigmatic woman said, and became silent.

"Transporter room two. Chief O'Brien, we need your expertise on this," said the Captain. "We need to beam inter-ship to Ten-Forward - eight people." At his signal the others in the room

gathered in a small cluster.

A slightly perplexed voice answered seconds later, "Aye, sir. Locking onto readings. Beaming now."

Guinan was sitting at the bar of the Ten-Forward lounge, drinking from a tall glass. Inside was an interesting appearing concoction of blue and green liquors, the rim of the glass having a thin crust of salt to decorate it. Arranged on the top of the bar were eight more glasses, each containing a preferred drink for those about to appear.

Turning as she heard them materialise, Guinan gestured to the stools and they came to join her. "We'll need Miss Maxwell too," she stated firmly.

Picard tapped his insignia again. "Sickbay."

"Captain," replied the composed voice of Dr. Crusher. "How can I help you?"

"Your patient, Miss Maxwell, how is she?"

"Why, Jean-Luc?"

"Beverly," said Guinan, "I'm afraid you'll have to blame me for disturbing your routine. It was at my behest the Captain needs her."

Slowly, the Doctor said, "I see." There was a momentary silence while she consulted with someone. "Yes, she can be with you in a few minutes. I'll get someone to bring her along right - "

"No, Doctor," Picard said hurriedly, "that will not be necessary. Chief O'Brien will beam her directly to us."

There was a second of silence as the Doctor digested this request, and then she said, "Very well. Sickbay out."

Ella Maxwell appeared soon after the conclusion of the conversation; she looked truly haggard. Grief had wrung her into a wraith of her former self, and she peered listlessly around the room. She livened up a little when she spotted Alexander Nelson, and she moved to join him and T'Vath.

"Now we are all present," Picard began, "perhaps you would like to present us with your idea, Guinan."

The object of interest deliberated, and then she propped her head on a closed fist, regarding them all solemnly. "Commander Riker and Worf both know I said I felt as if I ought to know more about what is going on here, and that I couldn't at the time put my finger on it." Guinan had everybody's undivided attention now, including Maxwell's. "This creature is an empath, right?" They all nodded. "And it hunts by using that skill and its telepathy to cause a kind of 'block' in its victims." Everyone nodded again in agreement. "It's after the telepaths and empath in particular; in fact anybody who has some sort of talent of that nature - they can see it. Yes?"

"Yes," agreed Picard a touch impatiently, "but going over ground we are already certain of does not help us."

"No - no, I agree," she said. "My point is that with the abilities of Rebecca and T'Vath in conjunction, we may have a way of stopping the creature before it goes too far."

"And if you have my wife's talents," supplied Nelson, "then you would have my own through the bond, and Sundar's because of his being T'Vath's brother."

"Indeed. It has possibilities, Guinan," said Picard. He turned to regard the child, "The only thing we've got to do is persuade Rebecca to help. Worf?"

Worf crouched down to Rebecca's level, and took her face in both his hands so he could look at her more easily. "You will try this."

As Rebecca nodded her head unwillingly, Picard addressed T'Vath, "Has this ever been done before?"

"Not with so many members of another species, Captain," the woman replied.

Troi looked out of the window at Pteros. "There's one thing for certain - we don't have anything to lose by trying."

Riker joined her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "No, nothing."

IT prowled the corridors. The prey locked themselves behind metal everywhere in this place, but, because it was not so inclined at the present, IT chose not to hunt. The two who had been killed earlier supplied enough nutrition for the moment.

On the bridge, Data monitored the movements of the beast with interest. There did not appear to be a systematic search pattern, nor had the creature killed again. He wondered whether it hunted purely on an instinctive level or whether it was an intelligent being. So far, the indications for this premise were not promising.

They were unprepared for what happened next. There was a massive jolt as the whole ship tilted violently on her axis, and then groaned as though she was being shaken apart. The hull screamed, then screeched as in mortal agony, the whole of the bridge seeming to fall apart - the bodies of the few remaining staff were thrown around to land in shock and tangled surprise.

Data was thrown clear of the command chair, landing in a heap against the far right of the bridge, and he could see the others on duty with him were in varying states of disarray.

From all over the ship, the sound of people calling in for information raged around them. None were more strident than the voice of Chief Engineer La Forge.

"What the bloody hell is going on up there, Data?" he demanded furiously. "The engines won't take that kind of punishment, not to mention the structural stress on the Enterprise as a whole. Not good, Data, not good at all. What did you do? Get rid of the planet?"

Data picked himself up from the floor, and stared at the viewscreen in amazement. "Geordi," he said, "you are right. Something most unusual has happened." The android's next words shook his friend badly. "Pteros II no longer exists."

"Whaaat?!!"

"Report, Mr. Data," Picard's voice over-rode La Forge.

"Sir," Data responded calmly as he checked his console thoroughly for malfunction, "Pteros II no longer exists on a physical level; it has been reduced to sub-atomic particles. The surge we experienced was because of a gravitational flux before the ship's engines were able to compensate for the disappearance of the planet. We do not appear to have sustained any damage, and there are no reports of any major casualties."

"There were eighteen people planetside," a voice said. Data recognized Commander Riker's tones - he sounded distressed.

"Thank you, Commander," said the Captain. "Have you a hypothesis as to what may have caused this disaster?"

Data briefly considered his reply. "I do not have enough information at present to formulate an opinion, sir."

"Damn it, Data," Riker burst out. "No idea at all? Not even guesswork?"

"I regret, Commander, I am unable to offer a guess as I - "

"Yeah! I know, Data. I apologise," and the android heard clearly the noise of Riker letting out a breath in frustration.

Turning once more to his console, Data's eyes scanned the incoming information rapidly, his fingers dancing over the controls. He tried several combinations of scans, then moved to the science station to check over his findings. "No, Captain, I can find no residual energy readings to indicate Pteros was destroyed by outside means. The only thing indicated by the sensors is the actual destruction of the planet itself."

"I see. Thank you, Data," responded Picard. There was silence, and then he spoke again, "Data, when you do find something I want you to act on the information immediately. I give you open authority in this."

"Aye, sir," said Data, and the Captain signed off.

In the bowels of the Enterprise, IT felt the surge of the searcher, and the rage when it discovered IT was no longer there. IT cowered far into itself, making its mind as small as possible in the hope that the searcher would miss the beast and the new lair and food source it had found. IT did not fear the searcher, but it did fear the punishment. IT feared hunger more than any other thing, and the searcher would not hesitate to inflict that pain.

And so IT hid, and waited until the searcher moved beyond the reach of its mind - then it could begin the hunt again. To assuage the ceaseless clamouring of its voracious appetite IT must feed continually.

The searcher gone from ITs reaching mind, the beast moved out

and into the corridors of the Enterprise.

Stars do not grieve the loss of a child, even though they are parents for millennia, and this sun was no exception; it would continue to sail through the cosmos with no awareness of anything happening, nor wonder what had caused the slight gravitational anomaly in the band of sub-matter which encircled it where once a planet had orbited.

Picard regarded the translucent matter which shone with borrowed starlight, and supposed one day in the distant future some other Starship Captain would look on the same sight and wonder at the power which could destroy an entire world in the blinking of an eye. Even Galaxy Class Starships had to work at that. The one thing he was glad of, was that the crew had been spared much and Data had reported relatively few casualties - incongruous considering the force of Pteros' destruction. But this reverie would lead them nowhere, so he closed his eyes and rubbed a hand over his face. Turning, he made his way back to the bar and seated himself. "Well?"

The small group in Ten-Forward gazed at him. Picard sighed and tugged his uniform. "Guinan, how do you think we can get this beast to take an interest in us?"

The woman sat beside him. "I think it's already interested, Captain. We just need to get it to take more notice of this particular group."

"Oh," responded Riker, who had rejoined them, and now propped his long length against the bar. The First Officer's attitude of relaxation was misleading; all were aware of the telltale signs of deeply controlled tension which were indicated in his too-calm features. "And how do we do that?"

Worf growled, "We bait a trap." He was no less tense than any of them.

Guinan's face broke into a thin smile, and she nodded in agreement. "Exactly."

"Wonderful," muttered Riker. "Who's going to volunteer to be the piece of cheese?"

"I don't think this will work," Troi broke in, expressing her doubts at last, "unless we know more about its methods."

"What methods?" grated the Klingon. "It kills indiscriminately. That is method enough for me."

"No. No, Worf, you misunderstand me." The Counselor paused as she gained their attention. "When I say methods - I mean what is it thinking? How do we pique its interest and get it away from the residential areas, and keep it away? I propose we try to probe the creature to find out more about it."

"How do we probe it without alerting it to our intentions?" Riker looked at Guinan, searching her face keenly as if the answers would be etched there in acid, and then spoke to Troi. "The last time you did that, Deanna, it came looking for you."

Picard, who had been listening carefully to the brainstorming, held up his hands, palms outwards, and waved his personnel to their seats. The musicians dragged over some chairs to join them. "Let's recap the information we have at present." They all waited for him to speak. "Right. First: the creature is a broadcasting empath. Second: Rebecca confuses those abilities to some extent. Third: we have a group of telepaths on board who are accustomed to each other. Fourth: Guinan has proposed a fusion of those people."

"Fifth: how do we go about this fusion?" asked Riker.

"Hmm - well, I think that particular ball is in T'Vath's court, Number One."

"I must stress, Captain, this has never been tried," she said cautiously. "I cannot predict accurately whether we will be successful to any degree."

"As the Counselor has pointed out once already, T'Vath - we have nothing to lose. And time is of the essence," the Captain replied.

"Sir," Data's voice intruded, "I apologise for disturbing you..."

"Go ahead, Data. What is it?"

"The creature is no longer in Holodeck Four, and has started to progress towards Engineering."

"We could do without it wreaking havoc down there," muttered Riker in an aside to the Captain. "Data, you've informed Geordi?"

"Yes, sir. However, the Engineering section will hardly be secure."

"Agreed, Commander." Turning to T'Vath and Nelson, Picard's face turned to stone - his eyes becoming granite - and he said, "It seems you are the only option we have left to us and the 'fusion' must go ahead. What I will require you to do is lure the beast away from any areas which would prove difficult to protect - " He shrugged and looked them in the eyes - "such as Engineering and the residential areas. I think you must offer yourselves as bait - our hand has been forced."

"To where do we lure it?" asked Nelson quietly.

Picard looked to Worf, who ran a schematic of the ship in his head. A large open space would be easiest to defend. After a moment of thought, he offered, "One of the shuttlecraft bays."

Riker nodded his head slowly in agreement, "Absolutely. I agree, Worf. That way, if things get too out of hand, we've got a way of getting it off the ship."

"Depressurise the bay?" Picard nodded as well, seeing in their faces he had made the correct assumption. "And the negative pressure thus created would suck whatever was present out."

Worf growled, "Not many life forms care to breath vacuum."

"Surely," Troi said, "we could contain it without killing it? It *is* intelligent."

Behind her, Worf grunted, and Riker shook his head, "No, Counselor. Not this time. There's no way we can possibly keep it under control - unless..." and he trailed off to gaze at Nelson and the small group of telepaths.

"I don't know," Nelson said honestly. "It might be possible for our combined talents to hold the creature if the fusion works. I must stress, this *is* experimental. None of us have the full blown abilities of, say, a Betazoid or Djorn. Only Rebecca here is truly capable."

"We appreciate this, Mr. Nelson, and only ask that you try," Picard said solemnly.

"If we must, we must." This pronouncement came from the as yet unruffled Sundar. He nodded to his sister who moved to join him.

Rebecca, sensing something was about to happen, and with an animal's uncanny knack of sensing when it would involve her, hid.

"Where's the child gone, Worf?" asked Picard with scarcely disguised impatience.

Worf skirted round the room (there were a lot of tables and chairs for her to hide behind or under) trying to spot where she had got to. He eventually found her cowering under a table in one of the far corners.

Rebecca resisted his efforts to remove her from her selected hiding place, putting her arms around the central stand of the table. It proved ineffectual, as the Klingon simply got down to his hands and knees and prised her, like a snail from its shell, out. The girl clung to him then, drenching the front of his chest with tears and mucus. *It would not be so bad*, Worf reflected, *if she'd cry out loud like any normal child*. The silent shuddering was almost more than he could bear.

He carried her to T'Vath, not trusting her to walk of her own volition, and set her in front of the Vulcan woman. "Rebecca," Worf said as softly as he could and mustered all the restraint he normally did not bother with, "this is important. We require you to do this thing."

Rebecca hung her head, and stuck her toes into the pile of the carpet. She seemed to come to a decision and nodded in silence, keeping her head lowered, and hunched bony shoulders so she was better able to wrap her arms about her body.

It was, however, Ella Maxwell who moved to the girl after first glancing at the Klingon who, at the wordless request, stepped away from Rebecca to stand a little way from her. The young woman reached out to the child's arm, and slowly slid her own hand into Rebecca's grasp.

It was almost as if Rebecca was burned by Maxwell's touch, and startled she looked up, brown eyes meeting gold for the first time. Maxwell extended her arms and the girl moved closer to her, the only time she had accepted any adult other than Worf with equanimity.

Troi smiled, a real smile this time, and looked up at Riker. "Kindred spirits."

Maxwell put her arms fully around Rebecca, black curls and

blonde mane intermingling so no-one could be sure where one started and the other finished. Maxwell spoke at last, causing the child to start at the sound of her voice, "She is sorry to be a problem, but she doesn't know how to help us. IT - " the way the woman stressed the word indicated her distress - "terrifies her. All she can do is project a kind of shield."

"The mind-noise," said Troi, and everyone murmured in agreement.

Maxwell continued, "Her ability to protect us would be limited." Then she glanced up and caught Guinan's eye, "But you can show us what to do, can't you? To make it work - this fusion?"

Guinan slanted her head imperceptibly in an affirmative gesture. "I think so."

The others, including the Captain, reduced to passive observers in this, massed together to discuss their findings. It was not a good thing for them to realize that the survival of the ship might hinge on whether such a flimsy thing as a Human/Vulcan multi-fusion - a thing never attempted before - could be successful.

"Guinan," Picard said, "show them."

"Of course."

As the dark woman with the all-knowing eyes joined the small group of telepaths to begin her instruction, Picard spoke to Data. "Commander, progress report."

The android officer did not speak immediately, then, "The creature is now approaching Engineering."

"Number of staff present?" snapped Picard.

"Eight," came the prompt reply, "including Geordi."

"Guinan?" the Captain's voice was held in tight check, but beneath the surface glimmered a molecule of hope.

Guinan nodded, her strange headgear set into gentle motion with the movement of her head. "They're ready."

The telepaths stood together; the two Vulcans at the outside of a rough circle, the three Humans forming the core - Rebecca in the centre. Arms linked to afford better contact, their faces were still, composed, at ease. All of those not involved directly were affected by the emanations coming in almost visible waves from the 'fusion', Troi being the one who reflected their inner peace visibly. She could not help but regard them with envy - but it was untainted by the lesser emotion of malice; she just wished she could add her own strength, but recognized her limitations with regret. What could not be, could not be.

The fusion was not now composed of individuals with their own unique separateness, but one whole. Each of them fitted together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle into a new and previously unimagined oneness which frightened, yet beguiled and filled their souls with wonder.

T'Vath and Sundar formed the shields of the fusion adding their cool strength of mind, their logic, giving to the two adult Humans

the necessary reinforcement to their churning emotions - a smooth calmness, the wall. Nelson and Maxwell contributed all their Human passion - hate, love, grief to name those foremost - and Rebecca was the lens of the fusion, the focal point behind which they could mass their power, a prism to focus or disperse whatever they could willingly give her, and whatever they gave her was re-inforced, hammered and beaten into something usable - well made steel forged to a gleaming sword of incalculable strength.

None of the watchers could be aware of what was happening within the fusion, nor could they ever fully understand the concept of individuality given up to become one thing. Those who formed the fusion knew more, but did not understand why it should work. That it did surprised and filled their hearts with awe, and the physical music they were so used to expressing on their instruments served to bind and flow through them to unite them totally.

There had been a brief struggle for self identity, and then everything fitted - slotted into place - perfectly. "Ahhh!" The soft sighing of outlet breathe came from their throats, and around them something took form - a shifting, glittering thing to enrobe them like a shroud.

Troi watched and, unbeknown to her, a tear coursed its way down her cheek in solitary, crystal splendour. Finally, tearing her eyes from the sight to share her all too transparent feelings with the others, she said, a catch in her throat, "It is done."

Worf and Riker moved together to come closer to the fusion, and ever cautious, the Klingon made his way around them.

Worf stood still at last, and regarded the glittering stuff encircling them. He stuck his hand out to see if there was any substance to it - there was not - and he was considerably startled when the hand passed through to the person beneath. On touching that person though, he found he was unable to release himself and found his mind in thrall to their power.

As quickly as he had been held, the Klingon found himself loosed and pushed firmly, but gently, away. He knew something had been taken from his mind - but what?

Picard joined them both, and moved slightly to the front of them. "Counselor," he said over his shoulder, "are they aware of us?"

Her pretty mouth opened and closed once - and then, "Yes, sir. They are - " Troi paused to gather her thoughts, and tried to find the words to describe what she could feel emanating from them - "with us."

"Indeed?" The tone of the word expressed a myriad questions, and the Betazoid rushed to answer them. "They... *feel*... They *know* us - " Troi shook her head, dark hair swaying gently along her shoulders. "They can... "

Her hesitant speech was interrupted by the fusion themselves, but not vocally. Each of them 'heard' a voice in their head speaking in a clear precise accent, a voice none of them had heard before, save Worf who jerked his head upwards to stare at Rebecca with narrowed eyes.

Be at peace, Captain. The voice held intonations of the

preciseness of Vulcan speech patterns. *The beast no longer stalks the decks of the Enterprise. We have managed to lure IT to the Shuttlecraft Bay your Chief of Security had in mind, and if you could transport us there we should be able to tackle it directly.*

"We could contain it there - " the Captain started to say, but his next words died a-borning.

No.

"No?" repeated Picard, and sat on a handy chair behind him. "No? Why? Elucidate." It was an order.

Even now, they explained, IT seeks to kill. That is its existence, Jean-Luc Picard. IT kills to live, and lives to kill. Without principle, without reason - the ultimate in predators. They hesitated, and then, But still you doubt? If you could see...

And into Picard's mind came a vision, shared not just by those of his crew present in Ten-Forward but by all of the living, breathing, sentient races aboard the Enterprise. It was a vision of such terror that he knew without doubt IT could not be allowed to live. To allow it its life meant the eventual deaths of all those on board - from Starfleet Ensign to civilian, and every man, woman or child - unless they, like he, could be used in the beast's great hunt. A hunt to span the galaxy; a hunt which would take place for the rest of his life - or until IT tired of the game.

Beside him, Worf stirred at the prophecy of doom and rumbled with anger. He managed to speak through gritted teeth, "Then, IT must be destroyed. We have no other alternative."

Soberly, Picard nodded and steepled his hands to tap the forefingers against his mouth. One word left his mouth, "How?"

"Tricky, that," muttered Riker. The words were flippant, but the mind behind them was anything but - the First Officer's intent was deadly serious.

Transport us there, stated the fusion in its strange multi-voice. We will destroy it for you.

Again, the Captain said, "How? You have no weaponry - you are unarmed."

Not so, they stated. Worf has given us much needed data. We do not propose to fight IT on a physical level - for in that we would surely fail. No, we will disable the beast's telepathic capabilities, and then it will be unable to hunt.

Reluctantly, Picard agreed, and tapped his communicator. Before he could speak Worf and Riker interrupted him - both men had the same thought uppermost in their heads, concern stamped on their faces. Riker waved at the Klingon indicating he should speak, but Worf deferred to his senior officer.

"Sir," Riker began, "I'd like to go with them as they don't - as you pointed out - have any means of defending themselves against a physical onslaught."

Worf stood in such a fashion as to convey his complete agreement with this argument, and he added, "They will require some protection if the creature realizes their purpose and attacks with

the intent of disrupting the fusion."

"You have a valid point, gentlemen," agreed Picard. He addressed the fusion. "Will you accept their assistance?"

They conferred together - although that was not quite a true impression, what they did was come to a mutually conclusive decision - which took barely a second of time. *We shall.*

Picard tapped his communicator again. "Transporter. Chief O'Brien, please deliver seven persons to - " he glanced over to the Security Officer who mouthed where to send them - "Shuttlecraft Bay Two." Before they began to dissolve in the beam he added, "Good luck. Ready, O'Brien."

Troi crossed to the Captain's side to watch them disappear, and in a rare moment of empathy he set his hand on the Counselor's shoulder to grip it, thus enabling her to feel his concern for the small party he had just sent off.

She asked him in a small voice as Guinan joined them, "They'll be fine, won't they?"

Picard looked down into her anxious face. "I truly have no idea, Deanna. We can pray they will be."

Beside them, they heard Guinan say, "Amen to that."

IT could discern no prey in this part of the ship. What was it that had lured it here? Hungrily, the beast put its muzzle into the air, slightly opening its mouth to draw the air deep into the bellow-like lungs and across the special organ situated at the base of its throat. Forked tongue flicked outwards, and curved up onto canines and carnassials which were now exposed. IT licked along the razor sharp edges, keenly anticipating what it could now taste, feel and hear.

Great paws spread six toes, and viciously curved claws protruded to prick the floor of the shuttlecraft bay. IT sat and began to preen the webbing present between those toes and, leaning nonchalantly against one of the shuttlecraft, scratched diligently at a massively muscled rear.

Then the huge head turned, deep turquoise eyes blinking lazily and the vertical slits of ITs pupils widened as the impression reached it at last of what had enticed it to this place. With deliberate lethargy, the beast moved to the doors of the bay and they slid open with a swoosh. Out in the corridor, IT tasted the air again and quivered with repressed excitement. The hunt would be good!

The party materialised some distance from the bay, and, orientating himself, Riker jerked his head at Worf to go in front of them.

Stealthily, the Klingon crept along the edges of the wall - he could hear the others not too far behind him. Worf checked the

setting of his phaser again - he did not want to be caught unawares, and he would prefer a swift outcome to this conflict. Fighting an enemy with such an advantage did not come easily.

The fusion moved as one body. They knew where the beast was immediately, and using Rebecca's augmented telekinesis spread the protective shield around their would-be protectors. They all came to a halt within the bay, and they announced, *IT is no longer here.*

Riker strode over to them and addressed Rebecca, "Then where?" He threw a nervous glance over his shoulder, and could see Worf looked decidedly uncomfortable. His skin crawled, and he did not like it.

Worf got to his haunches and scanned the area. Inside his head he could hear them searching for the beast, but IT had hidden itself from them for the moment. So, while he waited, he hefted the encouraging weight of the weapon in the palm of his hand, and prepared himself.

In answer to the officers' questions, the fusion began their 'mind-noise' and answered Riker's first query. *IT comes.*

Riker ran to Worf's side, and together they waited for the beast to appear. They watched the doors avidly, hearts pounding and breath coming quickly as the adrenalin began to surge in them.

"I don't think I can stand much more of this," the First Officer whispered. "It's hard on my laundry."

Worf just cast Riker a glance from the corner of his eyes, and gave a low rumble which the Commander took for grim agreement. Then they both returned to watching the entrance.

"Why doesn't the damn thing come so's we can kill it and be done?" Riker grimaced, and rubbed a sweaty hand on his thigh before returning the phaser to it.

"Too easy," Worf growled.

IT is here.

Riker exchanged a look with Worf that said it all. "Chrissake!! Where?"

Neither of them had seen the doors open, and they had been watching. What was going on?

An explanation insinuated itself into their minds. *We are unable to shield as much as we would wish without compromising our own safety. Protect yourselves - IT hunts.*

And then, without further warning and only an anguished echo from Rebecca, the presence of the fusion withdrew leaving Riker and Worf truly alone.

Back to back they stood, and then saw the beast. Worf was prepared for the visage of the thing, but not so his commanding officer, who made an all too Human sound of disgust. The only lovely thing about the beast were its eyes, and they were hypnotic in their intensity.

Spotting the two prey, IT crouched low to the floor and yowled

in pleasure. Tail whiplashing, the beast opened its jaws and flicked out that forked tongue, drawing it back into a crimson maw - and then out again, to lick at drooling chops.

"Oh brother!" remarked Riker to no-one in particular. "Up shit creek with no paddles."

There was no further time for discourse, and Worf fired at the beast. The bright beam of the phaser struck IT squarely in the centre of that great bony head, bouncing and refracting into splinters of light. And it had no effect.

"....!!" exclaimed Riker, and Worf could only stare.

Seeing was believing. Both of them were now aware of another ability of the creature, and that was its ability to disperse harmlessly the otherwise deadly blast of a phaser on full strength.

"I hope," Worf grated, gesturing wildly to the far right of them as they began to make a strategic withdrawal, "*they* do whatever they're going to do soon. Because, I regret to inform you, sir, we will be ITs next meal."

Backing away slowly and keeping a careful eye on the thing as it slithered towards them, Riker said, "Environmental controls." Worf nodded in understanding, and fired another salvo at the beast hoping to distract it long enough for the Commander to get to the console.

IT was not so easily distracted by such subterfuge, and fainted towards the Klingon with all its scimitar claws exposed; then at the last minute performed a twist in mid-air which changed its trajectory so it landed in Riker's path.

Riker fired his own phaser, and fell backwards in an effort to get away from the jaws of death as they approached. He rolled, springing to his feet in time to see Worf remove a wicked looking Klingon dagger from somewhere and leap to help him. Casually, as though it brushed aside a blue-bottle, IT swept a paw under Riker's feet and tossed him the way a cat does a mouse into the air. He landed winded, and tried to take a breath. Pain stabbed through his side, and he knew from the way his leg was positioned that it was broken. In some dim part of himself, he was grateful for the life he had had, and now he knew he had met his nemesis.

Worf tossed his phaser to one side now he knew it was useless to him and decided he would grapple with the creature hand to hand - he would die a true hero!

NO!! This from the fusion, and Rebecca, realizing her champion was about to perish, seized hold of the power inherent in the group; seized it and channelled it in a tightly focused beam at the beast in a purely mindless effort to kill it.

The rescue came too late to help the Klingon, whose attempt to attack the creature on a one to one basis had not succeeded. Worf battled with IT in an effort to keep the beast's mouth from his throat. Already badly wounded from a monstrous bite in his shoulder, he could feel his strength slipping away from him like the tide of the ocean. It was washing from him with his blood. And then, as the fetid breath of the creature surged into his nostrils and he resigned himself to death, his fingers were clasping empty air.

Into their minds thundered a word. *HOME.*

Riker hazily glanced up, and seeing his friend lying in a pool of blood dragged himself slowly along the floor to Worf's side. Reaching the Klingon, he said in tones of astonishment, "They did it. It's gone."

Worf groaned, but pulled himself into a sitting position and regarded the fusion. "Indeed."

"Number One. Report."

Wincing as he raised his arm to his insignia, Riker said, "The beast has gone, sir."

"We know, Will. Deanna knew as soon as it went. What we want to know is what took it?"

"But, sir - " Riker gazed over at the telepaths who were coming out of the fusion into their normal individuality - "wasn't the fusion responsible for the...?"

"The Counselor says not, Will."

"Captain, could we continue this conversation in sickbay? Worf and me - we're not so hot."

"Certainly, Number One. We are on our way."

Riker shared a look with the Security Officer. "What d'you make of that, my friend?"

Worf held his left arm by his shoulder tightly and tried to get his mental processes to work in some kind of logical sequence. "I regret, Commander, that I seem unable to offer an opinion at the moment." Then he slumped into unconsciousness.

"Where the hell are those medics?" wondered Riker.

The first thing Picard asked as he walked into the sickbay was, "How are they, Beverly?"

Dr. Crusher laid her tricorder to one side on a table and gestured to the supine figures on the tables. "They're recovering, Captain. Worf has lost a lot of blood, and there has been some damage sustained to nerves along the upper arm. He's lucky, though - a few centimetres higher and he'd've lost the use of the arm for good."

The Captain nodded and turned to look at Riker who returned the regard steadily from where he lay. Smiling, Picard reached out a hand and patted his First on his upper arm. "And the Commander?"

Crusher tilted her head sideways, and sniffed, "They're both better than they should be - certainly better than they have any right to be."

"Back to duty?" prompted Picard, who understood the Doctor's peevish attitude as one all physicians displayed when their patients were the subject of intense interest and they wanted them left alone.

Dr. Crusher narrowed her eyes at him, and her mouth tightened fractionally as she surveyed the vital signs of her invalids. "Four, maybe five days - " she shrugged - "at the most. Could be more if this doesn't heal right." She drew Picard's attention to one of the readings on Worf's panel. "But I guess I'll have to tie them both to the bed to keep 'em here once *they've* decided they're well enough."

"Mr. Nelson and the others?"

"Fine," said Crusher. "Okay, Jean-Luc - " She put her hand firmly in the small of the Captain's back and pushed him, very gently but inexorably, towards the exit. "Out." Waving a finger in his face she went on, "Don't come back unless I call you. Right?"

In the face of a greater power than his own, Picard felt it would be politic if he could permit the Doctor this small victory, and allowed himself to be steered away from his officers. On his way out and before he started to the turbolift he said, "You will keep me informed on their progress, won't you, Doctor?"

Crusher sighed volubly. "Of course, Captain. Now will you go?"

Picard nodded. "I'll go." As he went he exchanged smiles with her and walked off down the corridor to the lift with a lighter feel to his heart than he had had for what seemed like years.

It was difficult to realize that only three and a half days had elapsed since their arrival at Pteros. Picard was well aware things could have turned out very differently, and could only thank the powers that be for their timely deliverance.

Captain's Log, Stardate 48869.8.: We are proceeding to Thebian IV to deliver Alexander Nelson and his associates as arranged before the Pterosian crisis came to light.

The Enterprise's deliverance did not come about from the extraordinary fusion of Human/Vulcan abilities, but from an exterior force. The fusion reported - as indeed did Counselor Troi - an alien intelligence of superior abilities, which appeared simply to teleport the creature from the shuttlecraft bay. What the beast was to it - well, we have no way of finding out.

Mr. Nelson and T'Vath are convinced this creature was not aware of us as individual intelligences, and merely retrieved something which belonged to it. The brief experience of the mind they encountered under the fusion has further persuaded them that it was not a lifeform which would be inclined towards friendship - or indeed commerce of any kind - with the Federation. Still, the Enterprise has encountered many strange intelligences, and will, no doubt, encounter more.

I am also pleased to report the complete recovery of Worf and Commander Riker. There will be no lasting after-effects of the injuries sustained in their contact with the beast.

As to the fate of Rebecca Merchant, it has been decided to release the child to the custody of some paternal relatives

via the normal bureaucratic channels. The Enterprise will rendezvous with USS Godolphin in ten hours to deliver this part of our package.

Picard read the report on the small screen of the computer terminal, and then reached over the desk to switch it off. He sat back in his chair, and swung it round to look out of the window of the ready room. Lost in thought, he was unaware of the doors opening, and the Captain simply continued to watch the stars flashing past. The doppler effect caused them to elongate - blue, red, blue, red...

There was a polite cough, and a voice intruded. "Sir?"

Picard did not turn to face his First Officer at first, but just continued to watch the stars. "Beautiful, isn't it, Number One?"

The Commander moved to join his Captain and stood at his side to contemplate the vision out in the depths of space. "Yes." And they savoured the moment together.

"Enough wool-gathering," said Picard firmly. "How can I help you, Will?"

"Miss Maxwell is about to begin her rendition of Bruch on the Holodeck, sir."

Picard nodded, and got to his feet. "Shall we go, Number One?"

Riker grinned at the Captain, "Ready when you are, sir."

They walked through the doors onto the bridge where Worf was sitting in the command chair. He rose as Picard and Riker moved to the turbolift, and sat back down as they exited. Those of the bridge crew who were interested in the concert were already there.

Idle chat did not seem warranted, so Captain and First Officer were unusually quiet as they rode to the Holodeck.

Entering the room, Picard and Riker made their way over to Dr. Crusher and Counselor Troi who were seated in a prime area at the front of the orchestra. Beside them, Data chatted to T'Pol about the details of violin technique, and the others of the group of musicians regarded the small stage in front of them.

The audience was very restrained and hushed immediately when a small figure entered and stood in the limelight, centre stage. Ella Maxwell removed the short jacket she was wearing, passing it to one of her friends, and she bowed her head briefly before raising it to regard the assemblage.

"Thank you all for coming." Her voice reverberated slightly, and the Captain realized the concert was being relayed through the ship's communication system. "As you all know, my dear friend Tom died - " Maxwell's face quivered in an effort to suppress the emotion straining to burst its bonds - "a few days ago. This recital is in honour of his life and achievements. I will say no more, but let the music speak for itself."

The young woman shook back the short curls of her hair, and put the instrument in position under her chin. As she drew her bow across the strings, the holographic orchestra joined her, and the watchers were once more sent away to a far land.

An intensely Human woman poured all her grief and passion for her lost love into the rendition of the concerto, and all who heard it wept with her.

A week later, the Enterprise and her crew and Captain were back to their routine exploration of all things new and on their way to deliver some medical supplies via Starbase 332.

Data sat at the ops station, and was busy with some improvement to one of the ship's systems. Picard was making notes on a data pad, and Riker was vaguely bored. He shifted in his chair causing the Captain to look askance at him.

"Number One?"

Troi glanced over at the First Officer and smiled, then became wary. He had a most peculiar gleam in his eye.

Riker smiled back at her, and addressed the Captain. "Umm - have we heard how the kid is?"

Picard tilted his head. "I gather you refer to Rebecca Merchant?"

"Yes, sir," his First replied. "She's settled in okay?"

Puzzled, Picard said, "Yes. Why do you ask?"

Nonchalantly, Riker went on, "We...ll, I guess we should be glad we're not responsible for her now. Especially Worf."

Everybody turned to regard Riker with immense interest, and Worf listened keenly.

"Indeed? Why do you say that, Mr. Riker?" asked Picard, who was willing to go along with his First for the time being.

"I kinda thought we'd have a helluva job getting him measured up for the armour - " he paused to let it sink in - "never mind where we'd get a white charger big enough!"

The beast lay on its back trembling with anticipation as the hand which fed, or punished, approached. IT rolled onto its side as the fingers gently caressed a bat-like ear, teasing it to lie flat along the bony skull. As the searcher left the beast, IT stretched and closed its eyes, then slept.

ITs master sat as he/she/it regarded the pet. Save for the nuisance of eradicating the infestation of pests, which had resulted in the necessary but regrettable destruction of a valuable property - things had turned out fairly well.

Things would have been truly unbearable if the best 'ratter' in the galaxy had gone missing!

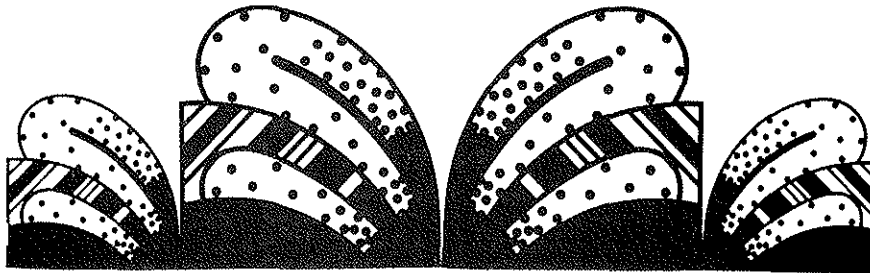


ADVICE FROM A FRIEND

You don't understand how this can happen, you say.
On the colony I saw many lives destroyed that way.
They took the drugs to feel good at first -
Too late they discovered it made them feel worse.
Drugs changed their lives in every way,
Their natures became as opposite as night is to day.

The Onarans' addiction was forced on them, true;
And now they simply don't know what to do.
Their civilisation's crumbling to dust -
To see it go this way is so unjust.
Understanding addiction is difficult for you -
Ah, Wesley, it's something I hope you never do.

Helen Connor



SALIS TALK

Come and buy my merchandise,
See how well it kills.
We'll arrange easy terms
To help you pay your bills.
Our weapons really are first class,
Come, put them to the test;
You'll see they really kill
Better than the rest.
In building this weapons unit
We've really reached our peak;
You can now destroy your enemies
In less than a Minos week.
Enjoy our demonstration,
See how each weapon does improve.
Just make your finest offer -
Armageddon belongs to you.

Helen Connor

